Small World

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Characters:
Thomas (Thomas the Tank Engine), Gordon (Thomas the Tank Engine), Edward (Thomas the Tank Engine), Henry (Thomas the Tank Engine), The Fat Controller (Thomas the Tank Engine), Toby (Thomas the Tank Engine), Donald (Thomas the Tank Engine), Oliver (Thomas the Tank Engine), Toad (Thomas the Tank Engine), Emily (Thomas the Tank Engine), Duck (Thomas the Tank Engine), Rosie (Thomas the Tank Engine), Douglas (Thomas the Tank Engine), Neville (Thomas the Tank Engine)

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Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Drama, Angst, Mostly Gen, Spinoff Fic, Scrapyard Scenes, No On-Screen Death Scenes, no graphic violence, HopePunk, Character Development, Bittersweet Ending, James: 'What we all learned in IaSL is that our world does in fact revolve around me' 🫙, did i mention the angst, mix of RWS and TV canons, dangerous vehicular emotions, end of life issues, Depression, Recovery, Bullying, and did we smuggle ethical philosophy in here? yes we did

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Small World

by MeanScarletDeceiver

Summary

In the wake of the Red Engine and his scruffy brakevan, the North Westerners have choices to make — which battles are lost, and which are still worth fighting.

Now includes epilogue(s).

Notes

Notes: What ho! This is, of course, a spin-off of FutureRust's incredible *It's a Splendid Life*. I cannot thank FR enough for letting me take the AU portion of their legendary fic for a whirl, and, if you haven't read it yet, I cannot recommend strongly enough that you do so.

That said — you may want to read this chapter *first*, as I tried to write it to be friendly to an audience not familiar with *Splendid Life*, and I am curious how the exposition lands for those readers. So, first give this chapter a try. (And then go, go, go and read FutureRust's, because you've been missing out!)

Thanks to HouseboatIsland and AngrySkarloey for helping me with the Scots. Mistakes are my own.

- Inspired by It's A Splendid Life by FutureRust

Chapter 1: And So It Ends

1: And So It Ends

Once upon a time there was a medium railway on a medium island off the north-west coast of England. There were some that opined it should have never been built, and others who wished it had been nationalised properly, and some who thought that it was on the island of Man (it wasn't), and there were others who thought it was a moldy old relic that was now hemming in a perfectly good roadway.

But there were thirteen engines who called it home... or who just sort of sighed and who looked off wistfully to the left instead of calling it home. To the newcomers it was at least a refuge. Every last one of them were steam engines, and never mind what decade it was, time works rather differently on this medium island anyway, but it was late enough that the only other options for them were preservation or the scrapper's torch. Mostly that second one.

To the older engines on the medium railway, it was undoubtedly home. But it was a home essentially built on sand, and the tides kept chipping away. The days they had bustled about with pride and expectations and dreams seemed so very long ago. Nowadays lorries and busses multiplied around them, growling and jeering. Many years ago now, one of their number had been badly hurt when pulling a chartered train, and never repaired. No one volunteered for "specials" now; there was a good deal of fear about ever taking on too much. And no one took much interest in newcomers. Either they would discover how miserable the place was, and quickly retreat to the world of preservation... or they discovered how miserable the place was, and stayed because they had no choice, and would soon be as unhappy as the rest. There was not much of anything to look forward to.

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But then one day, something Happened. Hardly anything had happened in ages. Oliver's arrival on Sodor, having spent years on the mainland as a fugitive from scrap — that had been the last Happening. Had shaken everyone up, had given everyone something to talk over. Even Gordon, the haughty thoroughbred, had gasped and laughed once or twice. For a time many of them had felt a renewed sense of gratitude and pleasure in their refuge. But a couple years passed, and the slow grind towards insolvency continued. All the Great Western autotank's resource and sagacity had bought him perhaps ten more years. And not much fun in them, either!

This one seemed much the same. A wild bolt, as if from the sky. An immaculate red tender engine from God-knows-where, bustling about, jumping in, causing confusion and delay for one day. He'd gone nearly everywhere with a scruffy old brakevan coupled directly behind him. He'd said all sorts of crazy things to nearly everyone. That he belonged there, that he knew them, that Henry had once crashed with the Flying Kipper (not true) and that Thomas was a rubbish station pilot (true). *And he'd told the Fat Controller what was what.* To hear one of them tell the truth about things! And to the Fat Controller's face!

Who was he?

Naturally, this was far too... *interesting* to be allowed, and the Fat Controller had icily sent him upon his way. For days afterwards, the sheds and yards were abuzz with happy gossip. What had he told you? And you? Did you hear he'd shunted Henry halfway across the main line? Did you hear, he made nice with the replica? Did anyone else notice he'd had Toby's number? Did anyone else notice Gordon's face was turning purple? Mightn't he return? Sir Topham sent him away, you idiot! Oh, but he never sent for him to begin with, so mightn't he return? Aye, yon Rosie hae a point; timetables seemed to mean naucht to the lad. *Who in the world had he been?*

It was baffling. It was almost aggravating. It was definitely interesting. Engines spoke to each other again, without rancor, some of them for

the first time in years.

But the Red Engine had raced off after speaking truth to power, and hadn't been seen since, and it all might have died down soon enough. Faded into the usual antipathies and humdrum indifference and the shared understanding that all their hopes had faded.

It might have... except that, after several days, the Red Apparition was followed by another thunderbolt.

For the first time in ages, the Fat Controller visited the sheds.

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"So it's finally happening," said Toby quietly. "Edward will go for scrap."

Several of them were gathered in Knapford yards. The sun was setting, the shadows were lengthening. In theory they were covering for Thomas, who hadn't been seen in several hours — if the Fat Controller’s reappearance in Tidmouth shed had been their first clue, Thomas’s unaccountable absence had been their second. Their third clue had been the expression on Henry's face.

They were all carefully trying to avoid looking at that expression too closely. Henry was never the most cheerful of engines, but in that hour it was as if the light in his eyes had been freshly snuffed out. Perhaps this was the best excuse to be made for Oliver, who was the first to break the awful silence.

"Gordon won't like it," he observed briskly.

For his trouble he found himself pinned by three hard stares. Donald's was a pointed glare that Oliver was familiar with: *shut up afuir ye hurt yerself*. Toby's was the mildest of the lot, eyes oddly slow and blank; there *was* a faint touch of contempt from the tram engine, but he was so lost in his own thoughts that it was as if the other engines were flickering holograms before him.

Henry's eyes were simply impossible to meet.

"I'm just saying!" Oliver was nervous, so he laughed gallantly. "He's still out on the line, but when he returns — "

"Maybe, Oliver," cut in Henry, "maybe, just this once, it isn't about Gordon."

Oliver was about to reply with great spirit, but Donald hissed at him to 'leave it'.

Toby appeared not to take much notice of the Little Caledonian sidebar. "I think Henry's right," he mused aloud. "The Fat Controller knows Gordon won't like it, but he's gone and made the arrangements anyway. He's prepared to ride out any fuss."

"He's made up his mind," agreed Donald, voice rough. He thought Gordon had the right of it, in this matter at least, but he was ever the realist. "And if it's what the auld engine wants, himself… I suppose it is hoo it is."

No one spoke for several minutes. Not until they realised that the

trucks, scattered in the sidings, were starting to snicker at them.

Donald shot Henry a glance and cleared whatever it was engines cleared in the place of a throat. "It owt to be me or Douggie to take him," he offered. "A long journey, Beckermet..."

"Rubbish," said Henry, voice hard. "There's no hurry about getting there — and you two are more use here. Anyway, it *must* be me. I've known him the longest. Would you let your brother be taken to the scrapyard by anyone else?"

"I wudnae let him be taken there at all!" said Donald, but it was a reflexive vow. He looked as though he regretted it as soon as he'd said it.

"I suppose I'm not as *resourceful* as you, Donald," said Henry bitterly. "Perhaps I just don't *care* enough."

"Och, laddie. Nae what I meant."

"This is good," said Toby firmly. "I mean, it's sad, of course... but he's wanted this for a long time. He deserves to make an end of it if he wishes. And it is right that it's you, Henry. No one would give him more comfort."

Henry glared moodily at the tram engine. "I'm not good at that." He looked down at his buffers while Donald and Toby exchanged a glance, but his expression was softened fractionally when he raised his eyes again. "It's the least I can do, anyway. Seems Edward's asked the Fat Controller to use the funds raised from this sale to fit me with a bigger firebox."

This revelation had a thunderous effect.

"Yikes," breathed Oliver, with a little shudder.

"Jesus," swore Donald.

"Good," said Toby.

Now everyone looked at the tram engine… who appeared entirely placid (to say nothing of wooden).

"D'ye nae have feelings, Toby?" inquired Donald.

Toby was cross, and clanged his bell to show it. "Of course I have *feelings*..." But the question seemed to have dragged him out of the other world he'd been in. With a pout and a glare at the other engines, he rang his bell again and announced pointedly that it was time he and Henrietta were getting back, he'd leave them to it.

Donald was unapologetic. "Give oor regards to the missus," he said dryly.

Oliver ignored Toby's departure altogether, he was studying Henry with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Will that *work*?" he asked, apparently bowled over at the notion of a reliable Henry. "Replacing your firebox… that means your boiler too. Gosh, it'd be a big rebuild…"

Donald answered, after it was clear Henry wouldn't. The Caledonian

was in a thoughtful mood, too. He felt that he'd never understood auld Eddie until this moment — but the exchange of his spent life for a new lease on an old friend's? This was a proposition that Donald could just about respect. "It is a big job," he conceded. "And nae done cheaply. But it's worth the trying."

Henry was still too abstracted to answer Donald, either. Instead he stared intently off to the side.

"But ye say Edward asked," persisted Donald. "Did the Fat Controller swear to do it? Or did he only say he would try and see it done?"

It was as if the green engine were indifferent to the question of his future. Weak vapor wafted up from his cylinders in a slow, idle way. His glinting eyes instead followed Toby and Henrietta who, now that they had been reunited on her siding, were already chatting away in low voices as they were coupled and then waved on to the platform.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, watching them go.

"Must be nice," observed Henry plaintively, to no one in particular, "having someone like that who goes with you everywhere to talk to."

"And then ye needn't speak with nae one else," agreed Donald, with a wink. But his faint grin froze and faded at Henry's dark expression.

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If you could have seen another big engine then on the line, you might have thought something about their eyes strikingly similar. A look of intense not-seeing. A cast of hauteur and isolation. Old, undefeated

eyes.

Then again, perhaps you would have seen that the engines were really nothing alike, not alike in color, not alike in face. The one stationary and glum, the other thundering along the main line at seventy-five miles an hour.

The Wild Nor'wester Express flew along, grand, complacent, and secure, the engine at its head pluming smoke and whistling proudly. "*Hurry, hurry, hurry!*"

(There had been a time, a very long time ago, when that mantra might have been *The fastest and the best, the fastest and the best!* But then… he'd never had any real challenge for the title. So its lustre had worn off.)

Oh, he was beginning to feel fine and settled once more. There *had* been some anxiety sloshing about the great engine's boiler, in the days following the Red Gatecrasher. It was embarrassment enough that their railway should have some trespasser of whose origins nor owner were known. But for this nonentity to then speak so recklessly to the Fat Controller! Gordon had heard all about the Red Upstart's final outburst at Knapford station and it had given him no small degree of uneasiness. Controllers required… careful handling. One did not dangle the prospect of new engines before them, lest they take up… notions.

One certainly did not fling topics like scrap and replicas and little Great Western troublemakers before them like a bomb.

And then disappear, to leave settled and respectable engines to deal with the aftermath!

Yes indeed, Gordon had had a hard week of it, wary, watchful, and furious. But the Red Eyesore had not reappeared, the Fat Controller's behaviour appeared not to have changed, the buzz of untoward excitement his visit had generated seemed to be dying down, and Gordon was day by day letting himself relax and expand.

As much as Gordon ever relaxed, anyway.

Of course, just that morning he had been present — and had been as shocked as the rest — to see the Fat Controller come down to visit Tidmouth sheds. He had been perturbed as he'd puffed out onto the turntable… knowing that when all of them had gone, Edward would at last be left alone with Sir Topham… and cursing unknown Red Nuisances under his chuff. But this bump in the rails had not greatly troubled him. It was one of several excellent and highly desirable qualities in an engine, which Gordon up to this point exhibited in sterling: He easily forgot things he did not like. The morning's disturbing scene might as well have been years ago!

Oh, but it had been a fine dry day — the first clear sky of the year. And there was a real pleasure in his kingdom slowly returning to rights. If you had asked him (though you probably *wouldn't* – but if you were daring enough to approach) he would have told you without a hint of irony or embarrassment that what he raced by were *his* stations, *his* towns, *his* villages, *his* signals, *his* fields. He might have neglected only to claim anything as *his* hill — but he'd make up for it with *his* rails, under *his* skies.

His railway. Hermetically sealed from the chaos and threat of the wider world.

And so it was that Gordon thundered on through it all, the sun setting serenely, his run full of unconfessed relief. With a swish and a screech, he brought the express into Knapford at seven on the dot — right on time. As always.

The station, amid the people's usual bustle, sported an unusual number of engines.

Gordon's lip reflexively curled — was there really *so* little for them to do? did none of these little engines pull their weight? — and annoyance began to rise in his winded, depleted boiler when he realised that Thomas was nowhere among them. "Where is my shunter?" he demanded.

The various little engines all shot looks at each other. Even *the replica*, waiting while her own departing train was boarded, dared to watch the awkward pause from the very corner of her eye.

"Not to worry!" chuffed Oliver, brisk and easy… apparently. "I've got you, Gordon."

The great engine's expression did soften fractionally — for an instant. Then he registered the unusualness of Oliver's being there at this time at all, and darkened again. "That is not what I asked. What has happened?"

This time they all looked at Oliver.

"Well," the autotank began, with a slight cough, "the thing is, Gordon — and don't blow your top off, now — "

A moment later, the blast of Gordon's whistle could be heard throughout the town.

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Chapter 2: Tidmouth Sheds (So Far Away)

Chapter Notes

ICYMI, It's A Splendid Life is now being posted to AO3! Go give it some love!

2: Tidmouth Sheds (So Far Away)

Thomas had heard the news and rushed over to Tidmouth. That had been his downfall. He hadn't thought things through.

He never did. He'd known only that *he had to talk sense into Edward*.

But he hadn't had a plan, hadn't even a part of one. He'd been driven by pure emotion — so many emotions, and all so strong — and he had torn off without knowing what he wanted to say.

As usual, this had left his 'plans,' so to speak, wide open for an engine who had a real plan to come in and intercept him. Fiery resolutions that had nowhere to go, that was his life.

"Edward!" — Thomas had blurted out the second his wheels had hit the turntable. He hadn't stopped and waited to be turned 'round, had just rushed straight through and if his driver had been that much less firm with his brake he'd have slammed into the old engine. (Into what was *left* of him.) As it was their buffers only clanked. Edward grunted but then looked down at the touch, faintly bemused. " — don't be an idiot, Edward — you don't have to do this — there's other things we can do now! If the Fat Controller is coming to see us again — and he came to see *you* really, didn't he? — but he said he'll keep coming back — you have more than one shot at it, y'know? — why do you think you need to go *now*? — did Gordon say something to you?

‘cause if he did, I swear to you, I’ll tear his wheels off with my *teeth* — if you need a change so badly you could be moved outside — or, or there’s another shed — or — *ARE YOU **SMILING**?!"*

Thomas gaped in a sort of dumbfounded exasperation.

"It’s been a long time," rasped Edward softly, in his weak and rusty voice, "since I’ve seen you so steamed up."

It took Thomas too long to find his bearings. By the time he was able to mutter desperately *You can’t go*, Edward was already saying, with much more authority, *I’m glad you came*. This steered the tone of the conversation to something much more relaxed and resigned than Thomas had come with any idea of.

He looked and sounded like the old Edward. It had been a long time, too, since Thomas had seen *that*. Oh, he was broken and filthy yet — Thomas always avoided looking at him because of that. But in the years since his accident it was Edward’s face that Thomas avoided looking on too directly the most.

Part of him had come to know, just as all the others knew, that the old promise of repair was dead. But that part of Thomas had always coexisted with a part that refused to know that, with a small part that still went on as though one day gold pieces would rain down from the sky and the Works would turn out Edward like he was brand-new again. That part of Thomas flinched to see the now-familiar damage from that enthusiasts’ train. It refused to acknowledge the extent of rust and soot that had been left to have its way with the old engine over the years. And, most of all, that part of him made him hesitate to even speak to his old friend. Edward’s face looked old now in a way that it hadn’t even in the obsolete, clanking days of the Fifties and Sixties… in a way that engineers couldn’t reverse. Worse by far, Edward’s temper could no longer be relied upon. He had become sometimes morose and distant, other times sardonic and biting, and even when even-keeled it seemed to cost him such an effort to

produce only a slow, sombre version of the Edward that Thomas could remember turning to all his life… and Thomas had avoided him, had increasingly omitted their dull exchange of news (they never had any). Guilt was was one among the sudden emotions that had rushed up to overwhelm him mere minutes earlier. Perhaps — perhaps if he had stuck closer to Edward's side, Edward would not be driven to such desperation now?

This guilt didn't entirely go away to see that now — now, that Edward had secured the death sentence he'd looked for so long — his old friend sounded almost like himself, again.

"You don't need to do this," Thomas insisted, but his voice was now fainter, duller. "There are other options — the Fat Controller will agree to almost anything now! He feels bad. (As he ought)," Thomas added in a mutter, mostly to himself.

"I want this," Edward said quietly. "I've been dying by degrees and to keep doing it indefinitely… besides, I want to be useful to my friends one last time. The Fat Controller did agree to that, Thomas, he'll put the funds raised from this towards mending Henry and — "

"I don't give a *damn* about Henry!"

Thomas's words were choked, desperate. A despair against which he'd insulated himself for years now was pressing in on him, ready to swallow him whole.

"No one ever has." The old engine closed his eyes for a moment, dismissing further input on his decision. "It's my time. Well past it, indeed. Thomas," he added, a touch of urgency rising in his hushed tones, "let's not spend our last good chat fighting. When Gordon comes in he's going to harangue me about it, and I… I don't know that I have the strength to have that argument once, let alone twice. Please, not

with *you*. It was good of you to come," he added, with a sigh that was almost — contented.

Thomas was still *bursting*, but indeed he couldn't argue. Not at an appeal like that. His protests and his reproaches all got choked in his smokebox and he began to feel as though he were having trouble breathing.

After a short while, Edward seemed to eye the whole of the yard and roundhouse, confirming its emptiness before he spoke. "Look after the others."

Somehow, Thomas snorted through all that clogged ash and emotion. "Right."

"It's not a joke, Thomas."

"Isn't it?" Thomas spoke dully. "They don't want looking after. And definitely not by me."

Edward considered him. Really studied him, which was uncomfortable. Thomas began to vaguely wonder why his first instinct at word of this news had been to rush over here. "Nearly all of them," Edward said at last, mildly making no comment on whatever he had seen in Thomas's face, "could use a friend."

"They don't want me." If Thomas had been less upset at the prospect of imminently losing his oldest friend, he might have been embarrassed by how pathetic this sounded. But he was and so he wasn't. "I don't count for anything."

"Well none of us count for anything, really."

"You can say that again."

"Our railway will never prosper," said Edward, meditative. "But it could be a better place for those of us who still work it."

It *had* been, Thomas remembered. "It was when we still had you," he said numbly.

"It could be again, I think. We have good engines now that we didn't have then, so it could be that… and more. If you made one last go of it."

"Me."

"You."

"It's kind of rubbish," observed Thomas. "First you abandon me, then you give me final requests that are… y'know. Impossible."

"Oh, Thomas. I wouldn't lay on you a duty I didn't think you could bear. I've had a good deal of time to watch and think, you know. I'm quite certain you could. It's not on you to rescue everyone and everything… but if you fight for it, you can make things a little better."

"Maybe the rust has started to send you 'round the twist."

"You are much stronger and cleverer than you know."

"Don’t be soppy."

"It’s true. You are." Edward sighed. "But how would you know? You’ve never had the opportunity to find out… Put yourself out a little. Help them when you can, stand by the ones who most need sticking up for, and you’ll see how you get on."

Thomas scrunched up his nose, a bit suspiciously. "Huh. Like you did with me?"

Edward smiled fully, this time. No mistake about it. "Best choice I’ve ever made in my life." And Thomas had to return the smile, it was obligatory really, but at the tank engine’s half-hearted return the fresh light that had for a moment made him look like the old Edward faded rapidly. "But I let you down."

"Look, I don’t blame you," said Thomas rapidly, eager to take advantage of the first sign of regret, "I know things are rotten for you right now, but if you stick it out a little longer — "

"No, not that. I told you, it’s my time. No, I meant… before. I let you down a long time ago. I was so pleased to return to service and prove my worth, and after I was given my branch line I… I was so wrapped up in my own happiness that I forgot about you."

"Forgot about me!"

For the first time that evening, Edward looked sad. "I stopped looking out for you."

The evening's conversation, already quite macabre, took on a nightmare-ish quality. The shadows cast by the walls and roof and the engines themselves felt oppressive and unreal.

These were some of the thoughts Thomas had sometimes felt in his very worst and blackest moods. He'd always shoved them aside. And tonight of all nights, he didn't want them spoken into being.

Nor had he ever expected they would be spoken into being *by Edward*.

"Come off it," laughed Thomas awkwardly. "You were the *only* one looking out for me. I suppose half the trains I've ever taken in my life were ones you arranged for me to have." All the most fun ones too — any share he'd ever had in some sort of special holiday traffic had come because Edward had asked the Fat Controller and sworn Thomas could handle it. Thomas *knew* this.

"I should have pushed for you to have many, many more chances than that."

"You did," Thomas scoffed. "I was the idiot who fouled up that goods train to Wellsworth, don't you remember? I don't *blame* you for not pushing me forward so much after that. You had just returned to service, we'd really thought you'd been done for, and I didn't want you to risk your new position any more than you did."

"And what was the result?" asked Edward, quite sober and sad. "My day came to an end anyway — only it's the harder for knowing I wasn't as good a friend to you as I ought have been. In the end what

would I have been risking, if I had advocated for you?"

"Your branch line," said Thomas. "Of course you didn't rock the boat then. You think I'm so selfish as to have wanted you to? I know it was the happiest time of your life."

"At least some of that ought to have been the happiest time of your life."

"I couldn't go." Thomas could hear himself rambling, but couldn't stop. The dams he had erected a long time ago against despair might crumble and bury him if there were one second of silence. "Any time I was ever allowed to take a train up there for even half a day, Gordon threw such a strop and it would make the Fat Controller too nervous to let me go again for ages afterwards. He could have never given me your job even if he wanted to. And he didn't, anyway, because you were ten times better at it than I could have ever been."

Though still heavy with self-reproach, Edward gave a slight snort at this. "Oh, certainly Gordon always needed a valet. It could have as well been me — I might have had more influence over him that way, come to think. Perhaps in that version of the world things have gone rather better." He sighed again. "And you weren't incapable, only inexperienced… Old engines ought to make way for new ones. Thomas, that should have been *your* branch line, long ago."

The words broke Thomas's fight. It was too late anyway, they were said. He screwed up his face against the conflicting emotions that those words set off in him like a bomb.

"I didn't want it," he lied. "Don't fuss, Edward."

The older engine looked at him with the greatest affection. For half an

instant it might have been the war again, their first war, and something had frightened Thomas in the night (and sometimes it seemed like all the work he'd ever done in that war had taken place solely at night). "Shh. Don't try to assure me — I didn't tell you as much for that. You'll be angry at me, and perhaps somewhere down the line you can forgive me, I hope. But I'm saying this to you because you'll be at the end of your line one day, yourself."

"Real cheerful talk, this," Thomas said, trying to steel his voice firm against emotion.

"It is what it is, Thomas, it's the order of things. It's not death I regret. My only regret is what I could have done for you, and didn't." He sighed again. "For my replacement, too. But in her case I think I might be partially excused. I was in so much pain — perhaps I could have tried harder… But it's for you that my regret is bitterest. When you most needed me I was at the height of my power and I let you down out of nothing but selfishness. I don't want you to have such a great regret when it's your time, I want you to have the peace that comes from knowing you did all you could. I warn you only because I believe you *can* benefit from it. You were always so much braver than me."

Thomas forced a weak smile because the alternative was to scream or to cry. "More foolhardy, you mean."

"Because you were braver." Edward was firm. "I don't think you half remember what a good and brave engine you are. Be a friend to someone, Thomas. You do matter, a great deal. Stand by someone that needs it and I think you will be astonished to find just how much of a difference you still make in this world."

"They'll have a good laugh at me, anyroad."

"At first, maybe. It won't finish you off if they do. But if you want to

avoid it… why not try to talk to my replacement? I don't think she'll *laugh* at you. And it would make a change around here, you must admit."

"Oh, it'd do that!" Thomas rolled his eyes. He didn't want to talk to *HER* — the very suggestion suddenly made the idea of his reaching out and making nice with any of the others sound at least possible, because *this* one was in its own special category of never-going-to-happen. Later on he would confusedly think that perhaps that had been Edward's design all along. But in the moment, so full of helpless pain himself, he nearly spat the words. "Right, Gordon would have such a meltdown that the whole railway would fail and we'd all come join you in the scrapyard. That'd be a change, all right! Anyway, it's wild to go and suggest such a thing when *you* can't even bring yourself to say her name."

Edward blinked at that — almost a flinch.

"Emily came to us," he said after a moment, "a young engine willing to work... and she saved that line when we needed help."

"Don't say that," snarled Thomas. It was really too much to hear from this rusting, rotting, tender-less husk that had once been the capable and useful engine that Emily had replaced.

"She deserved better from us."

"If I'm not to argue with you about this stupid scrap thing, then you need to shut up arguing with me about her. I'll try to help the others," Thomas added in a mutter. Reluctantly. Only because he felt bad snapping at his old friend, tonight of all nights — not because he remotely believed he was capable of carrying out the promise. Even yesterday he'd not have thought it was in him.

And how much less able was he to think of finding the energy to try impossible things tonight? When grief and fear were about to split his boiler in two?

He gave a sharp, harsh sniffle. It steadied him.

"But I'm going to be honest with you, mate," he grumbled. (Yes, his voice almost normal.) "As 'attempts to make Thomas feel better' go — this *was not it*."

He tried to be brave. He tried to resign himself. And yet when Gordon chuffed in — with a deep, mighty, furious whistle — a wave of hope had leapt in Thomas's boiler.

"*What*," demanded Gordon, every word slow, deliberate, dramatic, " — has that — little man — *said* to you?"

For an instant Edward looked at Thomas, falling back into the conspiratorial look that they had often exchanged with each other over Gordon, in the old days. In the before days.

But Thomas looked away, a disloyal kick of anticipation in his boiler.

Of course *he*'d not been able to talk sense into Edward — who ever listened to him? But maybe Gordon could.

Maybe… just maybe… the cavalry had arrived.

*

Four hours later, Thomas was beginning to think that cavalries were overrated.

Gordon *had* tried. You had to give him that. He had interrogated, insinuated, dissected, blandished, protested, pontificated, and promised. In a veiled way he had even threatened.

Edward had looked exhausted before they were even half an hour into it.

By that point Thomas had known there wasn't much hope, and he'd squirmed with guilt, torn. He hated Gordon for making Edward look so miserable but he didn't intervene.

Because he wanted Gordon to win.

He just wanted Edward to give in and agree to stay. They could make it up to him, later. But first they had to save him from himself.

He wondered if that had been everyone else's excuse, too. Because no one had been able to calm Gordon down. Not that anyone had tried. One engine after another limped in, tired from their long day (although, in a great testament to the sombreness of the evening, no one grumbled about Thomas leaving them to their own shunting). Each arrival had interrupted Gordon's momentum, and each one pointedly greeted and inquired after the others with unusual solicitude, trying to pack the heavy atmosphere with all the normalcy they could.

But no one had dared speak up for Edward directly. The newer 'come-overs' seemed to think that this was something that must be left for the old guard to work out between themselves as who else could possibly survive crossing Gordon? Well, the worse for them. Thomas stayed silent, in his heart urging the big engine on. Edward actually fell asleep in the middle of one of Gordon's monologues. Henry pretended to conk out shortly after. The green engine wasn't very convincing, his eyes shut tightly as he frowned in thought. Thomas studied him blearily for a while, somehow feeling sicker still. It wasn't the first time Henry had feigned sleep but something about his settling steam tonight was all wrong.

The rest of the lot tried as best they could to ignore Gordon harrumphing to no one in particular. It seemed to be about railway management, mostly — their own, the Other Railway's, with maybe the occasional barb about Henry and The Replica. They were really all too tired to pay that much attention. Even Oliver, who had gone out of his way to shed at Tidmouth that night, could only suck up to Gordon for so long before the late hour reduced him to the occasional yawning 'mmm.' They all waited for Gordon to wear himself out.

But the big engine didn't tire so easily. One hour turned into another. Beyond their walls and roof, black night overrode much of the bustle of the world. Stars bloomed in the dark sky.

The yard was still, although some muttering and soft cackling could be heard as the last trucks that had been brought in settled down amid their sidings with muted malice.

Down the line, at the deserted Big Station, buzzing electric emergency lights illuminated nothing. At length a shrill ring did abruptly crack through the silence.

It would have been most atmospheric for the phone to keep ringing into the night unanswered… however within one of the sleeping interiors Sir Topham Hatt came to with a muffled yelp and, fumbling,

finally silenced the godawful racket on its third ring. The imprint from his desk reddened the side of his face as he assured the buzzing voice from the receiver that he had simply stayed late, dear… he was sorry he had forgotten to call… yes, he was still at the office…

Lady Hatt seemed to believe this readily. It was only that she found it perhaps the least satisfactory answer possible.

They bickered for a bit about his job and his health and doctor's orders. It was not a very fair fight, she fully alert and with the benefit of a dinner and shower, he still blinking himself awake… and after a few minutes of it his lady simply sighed, gave up, and asked how his day had been.

He told her, briefly.

They shared a glum silence for a while. "Oh, my dear," she sighed again, at last. "What *will* it take, to put that railway of yours back on track?"

He was on his feet by that point, had been working out the cricks in his neck and shoulders. At this question he looked 'round his darkened office without needing to really see it — the piles of bills and leases and notices. The train table with a map of the island on which he could never shuffle his too-few model toys around to adequately cover. His computer screen, flickering harshly with one of several scanned reports from his chief mechanical engineer.

He had put in the whole evening reviewing those reports… poring again over the budgets… searching for some opportunity not yet seized. And so he knew the answer. "Truly?" he sighed. "We need a miracle."

Connected by the phone line, able to say things to each other that they were too used to never saying when together at home, the old couple chatted a little longer into the night.

When they hung up, however (Sir Topham promising to go and take a proper room in town), with all the world very much abed, Gordon was still grumbling darkly in the sheds.

Somewhere between consciousness and sleep, most of other engines stared into the middle distance with red, heavy-lidded eyes.

And this was how matters stood when Donald returned from his midnight goods.

The Caledonian stared with bleary, hazy incredulity as he slowly swung ‘round on the turntable and took in how much fuss was still going on at this ungodly hour.

" — calls into question his whole career… His plans never do go anywhere… *I* was the last success he ever really — "

"*Click*," huffed Donald, now settled in his berth. He was the only one who had dared park next to Gordon.

Thomas, at that time perhaps the most wakeful of anyone in the shed except Gordon, couldn’t help a twitch of the lips. Indeed he was on the verge of breaking into hysterical giggles.

" — put on the board. It’s been an unbroken decline ever since… and if his word cannot even be trusted… *I* don’t intend to work myself into pieces for nothing… not with The Dreadful State of the — "

"*Click, click, click*."

Donald hissed this much more loudly and even Gordon's massive powers of ignoring things he didn't want to hear failed him. "What?"

"Ye heard. *Click, click* ye go. We're all used to tuning out that deveaning firebox ae yours, Gordon. Still ye might haud yer wheest."

Gordon's face went a shade of purplish mauve that clashed horribly with North Western blue.

"I wonder you dare," he rumbled, breathing out steam, "unwanted as you are on any but *my* railway — to, to — disrespect *ME* — "

"Gordon, m'lad, from dawn to dusk I'm fain to let ye ha it all yer way. In the wee hours I speak my mind to ye like ye're any ither engine. Now stuff it, ye auld misery. Some ae us ha wuirrk the morra."

It was probably a sign of how tired Gordon really was that he gave one crooked glare, eye twitching erratically — but said nothing more.

The Scottish engine yawned and shot one last look down Edward's end of the shed, checking that all was well before he drifted off. Along the way, he and Thomas made eye contact, and Donald winked.

Thomas felt miserable. He knew Donald had been right to shut Gordon up.

And yet. And yet…

Thomas had sighed and tried to sleep. Nothing came of it. He'd shot Edward many a look in the dark shadows over the course of the night but his friend was genuinely asleep. This was certainly the fullest day the old engine had in an age.

Donald had done the sort of thing Edward had tried to ask Thomas to do, going forward. The tank engine reckoned he'd had better have asked the Caledonians! They were prepared to let Edward go, he didn't mean that much to them. Indeed Edward was the engine who had inadvertently got Duck sent away and Thomas knew the Scots had always borne a bit of a grudge about that.

But Thomas couldn't let go.

"You taught me never to give up," Thomas said in an aching whisper, in the darkest and quietest hour of the night.

It had been an oversight. Giving up was the hardest thing to do, and he desperately needed help.

*

His fireman had arrived a little early, expecting a more than usually hard time getting Thomas up to steam. It was not, however, what he got. Despite his poor sleep, Thomas woke up at once — with a plan. Well, less of a plan than an idea. Something he could still *do*. It was desperate and it was probably stupid, but it did ready him to leave the sheds and face the day. And that was saying quite a lot. Thomas coupled on to that idea and hung on to it like a lifeline.

Out in the yard it took rather a while to uncover what he was looking for, due to the fog of the drizzly morning. Maybe due to a less literal kind of fog, as well. Thomas reflected dully that he could probably stand to organise the sidings a little. He knew very well how — it just hadn't seemed worth it in years.

But he knew what he wanted must have come in last night with the late goods. At last he found the brakevan and drew level to whisper to him. "Toad?"

Barely awake, the brakevan mumbled something that Thomas went ahead and assumed was very polite.

"I've a train I want you for today. It isn't for the Little Caley, though. Will you help me out?"

"Glad t'go where'm'eeded..." And Toad yawned widely. It appeared that he snoozed through the time it took for Thomas to pull the intervening stock out of the way, only stirring again once they were coupled face-to-face.

Thomas eyed the bleary brakevan with more than his usual skepticism. *Some guardian angel.*

"Mmm." Toad blinked several times and stretched his eyebrows as far up as they would go, with a final yawn. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Thomas. And what sort of job did you say you had for me?"

"I want you to look after Henry's train." Thomas found the words harder to say than anticipated, and it took an effort to raise his eyes to Toad once more. The brakevan, now seeming perfectly awake, was staring at him with an owl-eyed solemnity. "I mean, if you're willing," the tank engine added. He wanted to be absolutely clear on that point.

He supposed agents of the supernatural were unlikely to help if anyone were fool enough to try and coerce them. Furthermore, the sodden and sleepy brakevan did not, in the light of daybreak, really look like anything but a brakevan... a brakevan that had narrowly escaped the scrapyard once already. Thomas had given up caring about a lot of things, but he felt wary about sending Toad on this journey if in fact he were just a normal vehicle that would be distressed by such a visit.

But Toad didn't look scared. Far from enthused, but not scared. The expression with which he was reading Thomas's face was more opaque than the tank engine would like, but there was definitely something like pity in there and Thomas didn't like it at all. He gladly took the opportunity to start pulling backwards as soon as his driver took off the brakes.

"Mr. Thomas," said Toad, in a discreet whisper, "I fear you may have expectations for this journey that I wouldn't be able to fulfill, if you'll excuse me for saying."

"I'm not looking to pry," said Thomas, his cheeks reddening. *Nor do I want to say anything that'll make me sound like a nutter*. "Just... just do what you can, okay?"

"Forgive me for mentioning, but you seem to be remembering what that Red Engine said. About how I am... seemingly an agent of we might say divine powers?"

"Oh, right," chuffed Thomas, coming to a stop with an annoyed hoosh of excess steam while the points were changed. "Did he say that? I forgot."

Some of the trucks were stirring, and eying them with malicious if confused interest. Thomas glared down at his own buffers. He knew it

was stupid, he *knew* it was stupid.

But if there were even a *chance*...

"Look," he said, flustered by the silence. "I don't know. *I don't know*. All I know for sure is that you're the best brakevan on the island, and that's reason enough to put you on this train. Edward deserves the best I can give him. Frankly, he deserves better than he's got, and if there's *anything* at all you can do for him today, well then I'm asking you to do it. I mean, you saved Oliver, didn't you?"

He hated how high his voice was pitched. It was a relief when they set off again, Thomas pushing Toad to a dedicated siding.

The brakevan said nothing for most of the slow journey, and Thomas tried to ignore his gentle scrutiny.

"I don't wish to disappoint, Mr. Thomas, but I had nothing to do with the success of that endeavor. I was, you might say, along for the ride. *Mr. Oliver* was responsible for *me*. I will always be very grateful for his — "

"Rubbish," snorted Thomas. "You forget, Toad, I've *met* Oliver. That idiot didn't get all the way to Sodor under his own 'recourse' or whatever!"

Toad looked mildly hurt on Oliver's behalf, but he pressed on, ever helpful. "No," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose he didn't. He had his crew, who were angels if I've ever seen any. He had people along the way who supplied him with coal or opened a path. Steam engines, too, who helped conceal us. Even a diesel or two who knew what we were doing, and helped — "

"Now I *know* you're talking rubbish."

"But it's true, sir. I will never forget that engine at Matlock who was asked to check our area. He called back that our hiding place was clear, while looking at us all the while."

"Oliver's never mentioned that." There famously weren't many mysteries left about Oliver's fugitive escapades. All had been narrated at length, with not a little insistence on the part of Gordon. Then again, Thomas supposed he could understand why Oliver simply couldn't get a grip on the unlikelihood of such an event as a diesel apparently doing him a favour.

"I suppose I may have been of assistance in some small way," continued Toad. "I kept the best lookout I could. I was, I hope, a source of support and comfort. But Mr. Oliver was right. There was nothing angelic about that journey. There were only... friends."

"Yeah, well," Thomas muttered, allergic as usual to sentiment, "if you can scrounge up some more 'friends' like that this time, will you do it? For me? I'd do *anything*," he added, faintly.

They had come to a stop, but Thomas's crew seemed to have gone very idle. It was humiliating to think that they were simply standing by, choosing this moment for a smoke break, surely not because they believed in the wild stupid hope that their engine couldn't help but cling to, but because they thought he needed to *talk*.

Oh, he was an idiot. Thomas's smokebox burned from the inside out, not least when Toad replied in his gentlest tone yet.

"Let's say, Mr. Thomas, that I *did* have such powers. For the sake of argument, say. I would think it is pretty clear that I already have the charge of another engine."

Thomas snorted weakly. He didn't know if he were merely being humored, but the truth was that if he were it still made him feel better than flat-out denial.

"I will be honored to accompany Mr. Edward's last train, but I fear I will be doing so only in my capacity as a proper Swindon brakevan."

He was *not* going to cry. He was *not*. "Yeah, well... tell me where the brakevan is that's supposed to be protecting Edward, and I'll go fetch that one, all right?"

Toad smiled sadly. "Everything that lives also dies. Perhaps Mr. Edward doesn't need to be protected because his soul is in no danger."

Thomas's eyes flew up again to pin Toad's with sudden fury. "Isn't it? *Isn't it?* What do you know about it!"

Toad said nothing. His crew said nothing.

Thomas was left hearing the break in his own voice.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, realising that he had frightened Toad. How stupid was he? Toad was just a brakevan, and too decent a brakevan to deserve to be yelled at. "I'm sorry, Toad. It's just... he's changed, Toad. Years of being hurt and abandoned have changed him and when you said that I just... that's the scariest part of all. He’s changed."

"I understand," said Toad. "For what it's worth, sir, I find it hard to believe that his soul is in any danger. Everyone speaks so — "

"His soul isn't in any danger? He's *asking* to be cut up and killed, Toad! I don't pretend to know much about all this sort of thing, but I'm pretty sure it's not normal to have a death wish! He's not the Edward I used to know — he *is*, but he *isn't* — and if we engines have souls that need protecting then it might already be too late. Henry, too. I was kind of hoping that if, you know, if the Red Engine had been right that you could look after him on this trip, too. It's a long journey there and he's not well, and — I don't know..."

"Ah." There was something a little more natural about Toad's manner, as if in sheer sympathy some of his usual code of conduct had been simplified. "I wasn't aware that you and Mr. Henry were friends?"

Thomas gave another weak, watery snort, on the edge of self-control. He despised Henry in a casual, weary sort of way, but it was a long way from the intensity of his loathing for Gordon or for *that replica*. Henry might be a load of self-pitying deadweight with an arrogance far out of proportion to whatever use Thomas could discern in him, but nevertheless they had lived and worked together for a very long time and he had a good sense of what was normal for the green engine. Henry had got some new thought in his smokebox. Thomas couldn't have explained how he knew, but the second Henry had come back to the sheds last night Thomas had felt it. And it frightened him. "That — that doesn't mean I want him to see him do anything stupid, y'know?"

He sniffled again and at this point Thomas's driver apparently decided it was time to take control of the situation before Thomas broke down completely. "Right then," he barked, "gossip break's over. C'mon, Thomas. We have to get the flatbed over to the sheds."

The comforting circles he was tracing on the side of Thomas's cab rather belied the harshness of his tone. The engine gave a shuddering sigh and gave Toad one last look as he began to back up. "*Please*, Toad."

The brakevan's expression was concerned and unhappy as he watched Thomas depart.

Chapter 3: Emily and Edward

Chapter Notes

Cheers to juniebugs for the atmospheric Chapter 2 fanart! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3: Emily and Edward

So this, thought Emily, shivering slightly under a layer of dew, *is what a morning is like, at the Big Station*.

It did not seem much busier than her branch line — except for the Flying Kipper. That lengthy train had woken her when it roared through before dawn, but apart from that there had only been a Local that had gone in and out, not very well patronised. Thomas could be heard chuffing and doing a bit of bashing in the yard early on — it seemed to her rather too early — but it sounded like there wasn't much for him to do and he went still for a very long stretch. Finally he was dispatched again, and a while later Henry could be heard wheezing his way over. It seemed Thomas pushed Henry to the station in an effort to stir up an indifferent fire.

Emily kept far off, trying to hide behind the water column. She knew it wouldn't render her invisible — but it was the one with harder water, always avoided by the engines, and she was far enough away that the others were unlikely to try to call to her.

She had *expected* to be at Ffarquhar sheds that night, but her last goods train had been cancelled — the factory in question having no doubt hired a few lorries — and no amount of insistence had convinced her driver to run her 'light engine' up the line. "They say sticks and stones can break your bones," he'd snorted good-naturedly, "but even those can't do much anything to *you*."

"*Dri*-ver..."

"Don't mind what they say, old girl. They're just jealous."

In the end, she had told him to leave her parked in the yard rather than in the sheds. That much, at least, he hadn't argued; they both knew very well that this, of all nights, she wasn't wanted inside of them.

She had also, however, told him and fireman that they must come extra-early so that she could be steamed and ready to make herself scarce before the others rolled out. But her men came in bleary-eyed at the usual time — like the *traitors* they were.

So here she was, desperately trying to raise steam, knowing she had little hope of escaping a scene that her presence would darken and that she would be specially despised for daring to have looked upon.

Henry, with a minimum of wheezing, had crept a bit beyond platform one… and had thrown a vague scowl at her from across all the lines, but Emily had not met his eye at all and he seemed to soon ignore her. From the corner of her eye she saw that he was in a brown study. Indeed he almost wasn't as glum as she'd thought he'd be. He looked troubled, almost as if weighing some complex decision, rather than devastated by the inevitable.

If he'd arrived early to clear his smokebox and have a think, the plan was put paid by the chuffing of another engine. At a covert glance Emily could read the shadow crossing Henry's face. She'd felt it on her own often enough.

Her heart sank, for more than one reason. Here it was again, here it was for the millionth time. She didn't care for Henry, *couldn't* care for Henry. He was no friendlier to her than any of the rest and he was worse than some. There were moments Emily felt irresistibly that she could have been his friend — she almost fancied he felt those moments too, for inevitably those moments of near-sympathy were followed by him crushing her with some specially rude or cutting word, the memory of which still had the power to make her eyes smart. She should never have the burden of feeling *sorry* for him.

And yet, sometimes, she did.

Like this time. She knew what it was, to be alone with some trouble that was hard enough to handle on its own, without the dread shadow of engine number four suddenly falling on you in your reverie.

It was the *worst* feeling. Gordon was such a bully, so hard for any of them to stand up to — Emily wasn't sure she'd yet seen anyone who *had*.

(Except for Duck, and look how that had worked out for him.)

And so her sympathies couldn't help, for a moment at least, flying to Henry. He didn't deserve to have Gordon on his buffers that morning. No one did.

She felt even worse for herself, when Gordon's eyes swept over her. They swept over her without the slightest hitch, as if she were merely part of the landscape, an utter nonentity. It was a dismissal that was meant to wound and did wound. But it also did not fool her. Henry might have been too preoccupied to register and remember her presence — but Gordon had.

She hissed and simmered, helpless, face set. Gordon wasn't even supposed to *be* there this early… for that matter Henry wasn't either…

Why, oh why did she have to be present for this?

The big engines seemed to be exchanging terse words about the platforms — on top of every other insult that His Majesty himself was personally undergoing on that day, Henry's train had been allocated to his usual track and it was clear that Gordon had begun with chastizing Henry about this. Emily, still trying to will herself into invisibility, was unable to help overhearing as Henry told Gordon to go do something rude with his heat-pipe.

Gordon's face darkened. He had sought Henry out with simmering fury... and vulgarity of any sort was always a good way to reach fresh depths of lowliness in the great engine's opinion.

"I hope," he began, in a tone of deep disdain that belied his words, "that you are planning to defy Hatt in the end, and not move your train from under this canopy?"

Henry's hackles had been up, but now he gave Gordon a look of blank bemusement. "Do you hope?" he muttered at last.

"I do." Gordon's voice was at his gravest and most pompous. "I hardly expect such character, such *integrity* from the likes of a misconceived, shoddily built mongrel such as you… but I do hope."

Henry had looked away again, with a weak snort. "Did no one ever tell you that flattery would get you everywhere."

This was actually quite a bit more than he usually dared to say to Gordon. Emily supposed his misery that day about Edward's fate made him bold.

"*I*," pronounced Gordon, "can get myself anywhere, without the need for assistance." The implication was clear and a dull, violent blush began to creep into Henry's smokebox. "However, I do you this much credit. You are an engine — a *real* engine, however flawed — "

Emily felt the shaft, all the way from across the sidings.

" — and as such, I am sure you must at least be considering the correct course of action here."

"The one where I lock my brakes?"

"You've done it before."

"You have quite the memory. Give it a rest, Gordon… it's no good."

Henry sounded so glum that Emily's sympathies were again stirred, but Gordon appeared utterly unmoved. "I do have… *quite* the memory," he agreed, "I pride myself on it – "

"You, Gordon? Priding yourself? Since when."

" – and I can assure you," Gordon continued, abruptly pitching his voice low and venomous, "that if you go along with this Foul Business, none of us will ever forget it, *nor ever let you forget it*… that you

allowed an engine for whom you feigned friendship to trade in his life for your benefit. If, indeed, you ever see any benefit from this scheme. Sir Topham broke faith with an engine who rendered him far better service than you have ever dreamt of. What makes you think that he will keep his promise to *you?*"

For a moment all the spirit drained from Henry's face. Emily felt it too, not this time out of empathy for him: she felt it herself. Sir Topham Hatt was her Controller too, the only one she had known or ever expected to know, and this was like looking down a precipice. She decided then and there to accept that Henry would never be rebuilt because she really couldn't bear another eon of expectation that finally went stale and rotted. Cinders, what ugly things Gordon did think up.

If only she had any reason to be sure he would be proved wrong.

But while Emily's heart (or whatever it was engines have in place of a heart) sank, Henry exhaled and recovered.

"I told you, it's no good. I can't put a stop to it. If I refused to take Edward, the Fat Controller would just find another engine. Probably to take us both."

"I see." Gordon's voice was laden with the deepest disdain. "You wouldn't care to risk your own paint. And so you plan to commit the ultimate betrayal."

"It's not a *betrayal*, Gordon. Edward wants to go, that's the only reason the Fat — "

"Edward no longer has the capacity for decisions of this magnitude!"

It sounded rather desperate to Emily, but Henry looked at Gordon for the first time with any real interest. Caution and worry began to cross his face. "You don't — think he's of sound mind?"

"If he *were*, he wouldn't be plunging us all into jeopardy with this, this — this mad and cowardly rush into self-destruction!"

Henry gave a strangled whistle. " '*Cowardly*'! How dare you!"

Gordon sniffed. "Is there anything else to call it? His actions are putting the rest of the fleet in danger. I do not say it's him. This isn't his way. That's why I say, he's not in his right mind. Pain and fear have got the better of him, and when he's well again he will be grateful that we averted disaster, no matter what he says now."

Henry had calmed, almost to a sort of weary disgust, and was now again eying Gordon with scepticism. "Pain needn't affect your mind — I should know. And fear has got the better of one of you. But I don't think it's Edward."

"*I* know that it's *you*," Gordon returned archly, ignoring new commotion from behind them. "No proper engine would quietly take this train. A proper engine would have a sense of *solidarity*…"

Emily's rising boiler pressure dropped again with a thunk. *Solidarity*. How she had come to hate that word. It was the same word Gordon had used to turn the rest against her and now she regarded it as a sort of dark magic spell that changed decent engines into blank-faced bricks in a wall that kept her shut out.

It hurt all the worse because for almost a week she'd had a bit of

relief. Since the Red Engine's visit things had been going so… the word really was *well* even though Emily knew it was humiliating that the bar was so low. But there it was. Another engine had spoken to her like she was a real engine, like she really existed and had a right to exist. He'd shown her kindness and she could hardly be shocked when he disappeared again with no one quite certain he had been real because how could he be anything but a bit of fairy-tale come to life? He had gone. But the others… she'd caught Donald staring at her shortly after. It had been an unnerving experience but his stare had no hostility in it and he only looked away when she caught him at it. After that point he and his brother had been, not friendly exactly, but there had been a thaw. They left her in peace, they whistled to her when they crossed paths. She and Douglas had been stopped at the same signalbox, which for her was the sort of common workaday circumstance that felt like rolling into a trap. But he'd only made some brief remark to her about the drizzling rain. In her surprise she feared she had *gabbled* for some time, offering a flurry of advice that she could not have much blamed Douglas for taking offence at. But he'd only given a tolerant grunt and whistled civil farewell when he'd got his signal first.

She'd been quite baffled but it had made a sort of sense — she'd felt sure it had something to do with James. (The others called him The Red Engine. She called him James. Perhaps she'd only ever spoken with him for ten, no more than fifteen minutes but he was still the closest thing to a friend she'd ever had and she was going to call him by his name.) Her coaches had later passed on a tale that confirmed things to her. Evidently in James's confrontation with Sir Topham he had said that he didn't want to stay on a railway where everyone was miserable — sent away like Duck for offending Gordon, rusting away in the sheds like Edward, or *tormented like Emily*.

She had nearly cried when she heard that. Whatever he protested, he really had been an angel.

So she had been *seen*, and proclaimed, and as a result at least some of the others had come to look at her differently. Of course she hadn't expected the Scottish twins to become exactly chummy with her — that would draw Gordon's ire and they were refugees here, just as she

was. For the most part she had just had a nice deep sigh and decided to enjoy the reprieve for as long as it might last. The twins had influence over Oliver; he might cease hostilities too… and at that point it might be safe for some of the others to let their guards down; she'd never believed they were all really so cruel as that, just scared… It wouldn't be friendship. But she'd take the relief of not having to expect unprovoked insult from at least some of her coworkers for as long as it lasted. And perhaps some part of her had, without her conscious permission, dared to hope for more…

But then the Fat Controller had taken it into his head to come to visit the sheds.

And now, indeed, here was Thomas, pushing in Edward's flatbed. Emily watched in flat resignation. The other engines were shocked, saddened, and bitter over this news and she knew all their grievances towards her would be renewed. To have lost such a small reprieve so soon was devastating. It wasn't *fair*.

Railway staff and even a handful of very early passengers went still at the new arrivals, taking in the sight. Emily was more familiar with it than any of them but even she stared, too dismayed to take her eyes away. The wreck of Edward was even more stark in broad daylight than in the dim light and shadows in the back of Tidmouth sheds. His elevation under chains on the flatbed made it worse yet, made it harder to avert your eyes, made him seem even smaller and less substantial. His own eyes were squelched tight: the light seemed to bother him immensely. Thomas's stop behind Henry was clumsy, and the whole train grunted and clanked. Thomas muttered an apology, much more humble than Emily was accustomed to hear him. The tank engine then beat a retreat backwards. Emily wondered if it had been his idea to bring Edward's flatbed early — or Gordon's.

For all Gordon made a show of treating Thomas with condescension, and for all Thomas made an even bigger and fussier show of despising Gordon, Emily had never taken much stock in their differences. To her eye, they had always been standing buffer to buffer… in every way that mattered. Thomas squirrelling off right now struck her as

unusual, as if perhaps he knew what Gordon were up to and had second thoughts.

The other engines didn't seem to take any notice of him, though. "Is that you, Henry?" Edward squinted. (Emily was reading his lips rather than catching his words, weak and hoarse as they were.)

"Yes," said Henry. "You're early, Thomas wasn't supposed to bring you till the express left." Then he added, with a tone of sarcastic cheer, "Gordon's here, too."

The three engines were silent for a moment. A tense, sad, strangled moment. Emily reflected again how cosmically unfair it was that she should have to… care. Oh, she *didn't* care, but at the same time hers was a clear-cut, straightforward mind that loved organisation. To bear silent witness to the mess between the older engines was awful. She felt a mad, wild impulse to take charge of the whole situation (before they could muck it up any further than they'd been doing, for all the past however many years!)

Having a self-preservation instinct, she instead did what she always did, and kept her mouth shut.

When Gordon spoke again, it was with what he must have regarded as an air of dignified sorrow. He may have even really felt it, but it came off as lugubrious and bizarre. Only years of being brutally kept down restrained Emily from rolling her eyes. "Not to worry, dear fellow," he said officiously, "you will not be soon forgotten here. I have been saying as much to this engine."

Henry, his patience clearly under considerable strain, opened his mouth — but a second later he snapped it shut again.

As it happened, he didn't need to protest. Edward's squint deepened. "You didn't wake up early to have a heart-to-heart with Henry. What's going on?"

Emily blinked. She was still relying heavily on lip-reading and at first she wasn't sure she had caught Edward's words correctly. But *Gordon* blinked, too, before puffing up his boiler.

"I was only making it clear to This Engine," said Gordon, at his stateliest, "that he can expect nothing, if he dares to do this deed. He will have no future here. Your friends will not speak to, not acknowledge, a traitor. Nor will we ever allow funds to be spent rebuilding the engine who led you to the gallows."

"For heavens' sake, Gordon," snapped Henry. "It's not a gallows, it's a scrapyard."

"Is there a difference?"

"You could just — talk like a normal engine, for once!"

"You," sniffed Gordon, "have some gall, talking about 'normal' engines."

"Gordon," rasped Edward, lifted up on his flatbed, "leave him alone."

Somehow Gordon managed to puff himself up and become taller. "On this tragic morning I would do anything for you, old friend. However, to leave this traitor unpunished is quite imposs — "

"Henry *is* my friend." Each syllable was driven in quite deliberately. "And you have never been half the engine he is."

There was a more profound silence still.

Neither Henry nor Gordon appeared to have seen that coming, not in a million years. Emily hadn't either, exactly — but it *was* exactly the sort of thing she'd always wished someone dare say to Gordon so she wasn't quite so shocked. Indeed there was almost a squirm of excitement low in her boiler. There were a good many more things she felt could be told Gordon, if the floodgates had been opened…

But they weren't said.

"I won't dignify that with a response," said Gordon, all icy freezing cold.

"I think that's for the best," Edward agreed.

"So these are the terms, then, on which we part?"

"Gordon," the old engine rasped, "I can't wish you well if you mean my friends ill. I can only hope you grow up."

There was a low, keening, lengthy warning sound from deep in Gordon's boiler.

Then his safety valve popped off with a burst of steam, at the same time he bellowed a whistle of rage and hooshed steam and soot in all

directions.

The high-roofed station looked like a small bomb had gone off inside, for the moment filled with billows of smoke. Porters and stationmaster and early passengers all shouted protest, and Henry, who had got the bulk of it, could be heard coughing and hacking in the middle.

Gordon chuffed out indifferently, leaving the commotion and mess to clear out as it would behind him. Ash and soot settled on everyone. Henry was blackened entirely from the side where Gordon had wheeshed him.

"Phew!" said Emily's fireman, who had popped over to use the facilities, and who had cleared the area only a minute before Gordon had erupted. He reflexively grabbed his unharmed cap, tugging it more firmly on his head even as he grinned up at Emily. "Now, aren't you glad you got to stay and see the show?"

"Oh, *no*," groaned Emily, knowing that her boiler pressure would not yet allow them to scarper. "How can I enjoy that? When they ought to have told him off ages ago!"

This seemed far too late to make much difference. It inspired no confidence, either, that the Fat Controller emerged from his office only twenty or twenty-five minutes later, once the smoke had well cleared and the air had mostly put things to rights. Evidently he was going to pretend not to have noticed Gordon's performance? Emily groaned again, only she kept it to herself. Her crew already thought her "dramatic," and no good would come of making another futile bid for their sympathy so soon.

In the interim Thomas had come to shunt a brakevan onto the short, funereal train. The men seemed to be assembled — the railway's Chief Mechanical Engineer among them — and Emily supposed the Fat

Controller had only come out to face the station at all in order to personally clear them for departure.

He looked solemn and sorry as he stepped toward the flatbed. Emily knew it would be considered less than none of her business but she didn't care, she watched carefully anyway, a sick, straightened, morbid curiosity making her boiler bands feel tight.

But she saw nothing. Man and engine alike seemed to want to say the appropriate last words but so far as Emily could tell neither one managed.

In the end, the Fat Controller took off his hat and reached towards Edward's nearest lamp-iron. His assistant took it the last foot or so and placed the hat there.

The Fat Controller spoke briefly to the guard and driver, nodded once in flat encouragement to Henry, and the sorry train was waved off.

Emily watched them depart, no longer caring at this point if she were observed or how she would be judged. With her eyes she *willed* them on.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears, but she wasn't sad. Fiercely relieved, rather. *Go, go,* ***go***, she urged Henry's slow chuffs. *Please. Get out of here.*

She should have liked to be sorry. She should have liked to feel a decent engine, feeling a decent sense of sorrow to see a colleague gone on his final journey. What she mourned was *that*, what she mourned was the better and happier self she could have been, if she had come to Sodor under different circumstances.

She was ashamed and bitter over it, but she was glad to see Edward leave.

Maybe…

Maybe, now that he had really gone, the others would actually have a chance to grieve and heal.

Maybe they could forgive her for the crime of having come here. No, that was asking too much, they were too deeply buried in their bitterness to forgive her. But perhaps it would be easier for them to forget.

Maybe, with her predecessor really gone… she might finally be allowed to start living her life.

Indeed, when a quarter-hour later her driver finally declared her ready to move, she *leapt* to fetch her train. Her morning had got off to a miserable start, but Emily was determined to make sure that it would get better from here.

She was fed up with hiding and shame.

*

Some eight hours and hundred lurching miles later, it was Edward's turn for thoughts of *So this is what it's like…*

He'd expected to be relieved more than anything upon reaching their destination. He'd set his mind on arriving here years ago, and in any case the journey had been intensely uncomfortable. There might have been some consolation or strength to be found on this trek, seeing the whole length of the Sodor main line for a last time, taking in sights that had once been well-beloved and traversing over rails he had once helped, a very long time ago, to lay. And then after crossing the bridge they were in old Furness territory. Perhaps it should have felt right somehow, going home to die. At the very least he had been vaguely interested in laying eyes on it, seeing what was recognizable and what had changed. But they rattled on too quickly and he was disoriented from so much daylight after years confined to Tidmouth shed, even as the endless jostling pained his worn and damaged parts. He closed his eyes, feeling sick, and prayed for the interminable ride to come to its end.

And it *was* a relief, at first, when Henry was diverted to a lonely short line and they slowed to a crawl. Foliage grew thicker and closer than regulations ought really allow, but it was soothing and welcome, and it cleared all too soon to reveal a vast, desert-like clearing whose ugliness was not broken by a single hint of rich color. There were mounds of junk, a whole mountain range of industrial flotsam and jetsam. Looming behind them were lines of battered trucks, coaches, and carriages that stood on rusting rails, dull and hopeless. Even the glimpse of water on the other end — there was a harbour of sorts — was dirty and uninspired.

Edward had meant to be braver than this, but at the sight he couldn't help a sharp, shaky gasp.

His hopes no one had overheard were dashed when Henry's whistle of arrival sounded low and gentle. "Don't worry, Edward," he muttered. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

For a second or two Edward wasn't sure he'd heard right. Then he hoped he hadn't. "Henry..."

The points diverted them to the left.

"Henry," Edward hissed again, once they had clattered through the turn, "don't get any wild notions..."

"Too late." Henry smiled in a twisted sort of way. His words were very tense. "I've always had my 'whims', don't you remember?"

Edward felt the world dropping away. "Henry — Henry, *no*. You need to go home and be rebuilt."

"Make me." Henry sounded almost... amused.

"I asked the Fat Controller, he's going to use the funds from this sale towards getting you a new firebox; he promised — "

"I'm aware of that. Look, mate. I appreciate the thought, more than I can say, but your scrap value is not going to cover as big a rebuild as that. On the other rail, for the two of us he can get at least one reliable engine, and that might make all the difference for the North Western."

"Henry… "

"I really hope the next words out of your mouth are 'gosh, Henry, you're so noble.' "

"Isn't this brakevan faced?!"

" 'Handsome, too.' "

"You have a responsibility to get him back safely!"

"I specifically asked for a faceless one," grumbled Henry. "Thomas messes up my trains just to spite me, you know. Anyway, the Fat Controller will arrange to have him picked up and returned, I don't doubt. He's well worth the shipping cost. Best brakevan on the island."

"Hen-ry..."

" 'Ed-ward...' " Henry laughed, sounding livelier than he had in years, and Edward should have loved to hear it if it had been under any other circumstances. But then the green engine grew sober. "Save your breath, I've made up my mind. You heard Gordon, I haven't anything to look forward to if I *did* go back. Anyway for once he's right. You're the only real friend I've ever had and I can't leave you here alone, it just isn't in me." Perhaps this was too sincere and serious, for then Henry gave a would-be casual puff. "It's just another job I wasn't able to complete; what difference does one more make?"

The old engine closed his eyes, overwhelmed with the enormity of the problem and how inadequate he felt to fix it. He was exhausted by the efforts he'd already made in order to be heard and so, altogether, he should probably conserve his strength while he looked for a better way to talk Henry out of this. Scolding and fussing, though they had come the most naturally in the moment of shock, were clearly not going to do the trick.

Presumably the driver and CME had overheard, and more than likely they were mulling the same thing. But he couldn't count on them to

overrule the engine by force. Henry had a history of digging in his wheels and refusing to be moved once he had decided to stay put, and Edward feared from something all-too-steady in his tone that Henry had given this a great deal more thought than the long-ago time when he had resolved to take shelter from the rain.

Anyway, here they were, stopping by what appeared to be the headquarters of the operation, such as it were. There was a small one-story structure that served as office with attached mechanical workshop, or at least an attached tool shed. Henry's fireman descended and went to knock on the door, and had to knock several times. ("All right, all right already!" a voice bawled from within, at length. "Can't you see I'm on the bleedin' phone?!") The engines didn't mind the wait so much as the humans: they were eying the scrapyard — or what they could see of it, as a moderate fog was coming off the harbour, and light was dim on that overcast day.

The great remains of what had been a large BR Standard dominated the scene: sections had already been torn from it, and it showed no sign of life. But most of this part of the yard consisted of road vehicles, and of the rail vehicles they could see most were open trucks and rusting carriages, and of the locomotives they could see, all but the one were diesel engines, who stared at the newcomers with unfriendly appraisal. It had been a very long time since Edward had been "the new engine" anywhere, but he saw at once that one could expect to be hazed as a newcomer here as most anywhere else. There was a macabre normalcy to it. It wouldn't be pleasant but it was a sequence to anticipate and that was less frightening than facing a void where everyone acted in strange and alien ways.

Finally the man from the office came out, a rangy figure with a very long gingery beard, the hair on his head and face patchy with a moth-eaten appearance. But his eyes were keen and he was clearly the owner as well as the manager. He eyed Edward's flatbed dourly. "Is the flatbed for us, too?" he asked.

"No." Sodor's CME was annoyed at this apparent avarice.

"Well hang it all, it has no incline to shunt things on and off. How did you get that engine on it?"

"A crane. Surely you have one of those."

The scrapyard owner puffed out his cheeks when he sighed. "Over by the harbour! Unloadin' things! Whatta botch. Monty! Get a move on, you'll have to take this load over to Granny. Leave the old iron there, bring the flatbed straight back so these people can be on their way. A carryin'-car with no incline! God, the whole lot is something Stephenson left over!"

The man might not have been used to dealing with engines who still had their own power — if he had, he'd have known he was simply begging for Henry to eject steam from his left-hand cylinder, directly into his face.

But he got off lucky. Henry was distracted, and so was Edward — distracted, at first, by the sound of a steam engine puffing. Then disbelief, when the engine had well pushed past the fog to come to a stop in front of the points. "Oh, God," breathed Henry, amazed at the familiar shape, even in its unfamiliar guise.

"Henry," said the tank engine coolly. So then there was no doubt. His eyes flicked upwards, and if there was a slight hitch to his gaze his voice was so steady that you thought at once you must have only imagined it. "Edward."

Edward had doubted his eyes, but he heard that voice. He had even heard the chuffs: he *knew* that cadence. Now his voice croaked helplessly.

"*Duck?*"

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank-you for all the reactions, both comments here and on tumblr - much appreciated!

Chapter 4: Henry and Duck

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to @konnosaurus for the incredibly on-vibe fanart of Emily and Douglas's moment in Ch 3!
>
> Jul 1 2024: Minor line edits made

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4: Henry and Duck

It was a very different-looking Duck. The beautifully-kept Great Western livery he had been so proud of on Sodor was now a distant memory; he'd been repainted in some sort of reddish ochre a good while back, and it did not appear to have been re-touched since. Salt and scale and soot had been left to have their way with it too long, leaving ugly discoloured patches. His vacuum bag had been removed, and so had his sandboxes. The greatest change, though, was in his face. There was a flat, dull cast to his eye that clearly was not something that could be sorted out with a few replacement parts and a good deep cleaning.

But he was otherwise intact.

He was alive.

He was *in steam*.

Henry's mind was blank for the space of one entire minute. A scrapyard shunter… they were common figures in engine gossip and tales, often painted as despicable wretches who betrayed their nearest and dearest to save their own bunkers, only to be karmically destroyed themselves, in the end. Edward himself had once long ago

spun a pretty good shedtime yarn featuring the trope, and Henry could remember them all eating it up, which was — awkward, now. He and Duck hadn't exactly been great chums but he knew how honourable the pannier tank to be and he did not for one second consider that Duck had volunteered for the role in order to save himself, the idea was absurd. This was real life, real life in all its messy jaggedness, and when Henry stared at his ex-colleague he remembered with some trenchancy that engines in fact have little choice in the matter of their jobs.

Anyway, after that wild blank moment of disbelief had passed, Henry knew exactly what he must do.

He seemed to be the only one. "The Fat Controller sent him *here?*" Henry's driver was hissing to the CME, as they began to disembark.

"Of course not!" The CME's low reply sounded mortally offended. "He would have never sold Duck to a scrapyard. We found him a job with London Transport's P-Way…"

The men went over to greet the Great Western engine with a sort of suppressed warmth — refusing to let themselves cross the line into eager. Because of course. *They* intended to leave within the hour and abandon Duck again, so there was no point in being too kind and raising false hopes.

But they were pleased to see him, nonetheless. That was unmistakable.

"We had no idea you were this far north. How long have you been here, lad?" asked the CME.

He got no answer out of the former Sodor engine, however, both

because Duck was not quick to reply (Henry was not sure Duck knew) and because the mangy-looking owner was asking the CME questions of his own.

"Why has no one put sealant over that old thing?" he demanded (an impatient toss of his arm indicated Edward).

The CME's opinion of the scrapyard owner was clearly very low. He folded his arms, checking his annoyance before replying…

Meanwhile Duck's driver — he seemed to have only one man on the footplate — had come down to set the points. Soon they had pulled forward, detached the brakevan, shunted him behind on the parallel track for safekeeping. Then they backed onto the flatbed.

"Duck..." Henry tried not to eavesdrop but he couldn't fail to pick out Edward's hoarse whisper amid all the activity. "Duck, I am so sorry..."

Henry's fireman coupled the engine to the flatbed. Duck was brisk and matter-of-fact. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm glad to see you again, Edward, even if I wish it were under different circumstances. We'll soon have you off that thing, anyway."

Henry couldn't help a humourless grin. Trust Duck to be businesslike in a scrapyard. *He's kind of perfect for the role*, he reflected. He supposed this was a rather snide thought to have but considering what he was about to do he was not for feeling guilty. As for Edward, Edward who had eaten his heart out for years over the guilt of having got Duck sent away — it was clear that Henry wouldn't have to worry about any further resistance from *him*.

It was a slightly bitter thought, but only slightly. Henry agreed with his priority, after all.

He cut into the conversation between the men, who had started to descend into something rather close to bickering. "How much will you pay the North Western for me?" he demanded of the owner.

The owner eyed him. "I don't play games."

"I'm not playing. I intend to stay, if you make a fair offer."

The owner looked at the CME. "Is he for sale? I didn't think that top-hat-wearin' bastard would be gettin' rid of any engine that could still move under its own power."

"He is not. Henry, be *quiet*."

Henry was not quiet. Perfect obedience was for the Ducks and Edwards of the world. Yet here in the end all three of them were, standing around in the same scrapyard. "I am not going back to Sodor without Edward and they can't make me," he told the mangy man. "Buy me."

The scrapyard owner was already running an eye over him, from smokebox to tender. "I can't afford you," he said... reluctantly. Henry was the only thing currently in the yard that rivalled the size of the great carcasse that had once been a Standard 9.

"Then throw in Duck as trade."

"The pannier?" The owner looked back for a moment, as Duck dragged Edward on the flatbed to the points. "Your scrap value will be higher

but he's useful to me, so long as I still have this old lot of coal to use up. *You're* too big to shunt here easily and I can already see you're one to argue. Monty here's never talked back to me." The owner grinned for a moment, looking ghoulish. "He despises me, of course — don't you, boy? Murders me in his heart every day. But he does what he's told without fuss. *You* seem like a headache and a half, big fellow."

"I won't need my tender here, this place is so small," said Henry... feeling somehow quite as dispassionate and logical as a thousand Ducks. "You could scrap that immediately and still have a shunter. I'm not a bad engine, you can ask my driver. Anyway all I want is to stay with Edward. You can use that to keep me in line pretty easily."

The owner snorted. "Cos you have a notion of getting away with him, no doubt."

Henry snorted too, aching and stuffed up from the day's journey.

Besides, it wasn't the Sixties anymore. There was nowhere to run away to.

The owner turned to the NWR men. "*You're* quiet," he said, almost accusing.

"Don't wish to leave Henry here," said the CME, looking genuinely conflicted. "But the truth is I don't wish to leave the Duck here either. He's a fine engine. Ought never to have been sent away."

"Hmm." The owner was sour and shrewd. "What's wrong with this one, then? This 'Duck' of yours is a good worker, but why are you so ready to let go of a big Pacific like this? He's a beaut."

"Thanks," said Henry. "I don't steam well — not without Welsh coal."

"Ah. Now it comes out."

"It won't make any difference to *you*. It's only long journeys where I'm unreliable. I can shunt just fine. They used to make me swap jobs with Duck pretty often, when he worked our railway."

The owner was eying Henry again. "Now that Hatt is prepared to scrap his engines, you reckon your time is up soon anyway."

"That's right," said Henry bitterly. "Sending Duck back in my place will be the most useful thing I've done for the railway in ten years. You ought to throw in some money, though. I'm much bigger — more material."

"I would rather have you parted out now than when Hatt's let you get in that condition," conceded the owner, gesturing high in Edward's direction. "Wasteful is what it is. But they say better the devil you know than the devil you don't. I like your 'Duck'. He's much more reliable than the diesel shunter he replaced here."

"I don't see how you can deny a second chance at life to an engine you 'like'."

It was Edward's voice, low and raspy, that floated down to them. There was no venom in it, only a sad seriousness, and in turn the mangy man nodded, with more civility than Henry would have expected.

When he spoke, however, his voice was ironic. "And I don't see how

Hatt could have done what he's done to you to any machine. I'm a scrapper and me mum don't boast of me, but I have some standards — you'll soon see. Anyhow, old thing, you're not wrong. I'm not likely to say no — not if it was me own engine that was askin'." He turned to Duck. "What do you have to say about it, Monty old chap? You're not exactly leapin' for joy."

It was true. Duck's eyes had been dull throughout the entire argument, betraying no interest either way. Nor did he seem to care all that much that everyone's attention was now on him.

"You'll do what's best for you," he said at last.

The owner chuckled without humour. "Flattering!"

"It's what all humans do," said Duck tonelessly.

The owner considered him a moment, face having grown rather dark. Then he turned to Henry and told *him* to take Edward and his flatbed down to the crane at the little river-harbour. "If you can do that without derailing or jamming a point, then we'll see."

*

While Henry did so, the men disappeared inside the little office-shop. Duck waited, impassive. He truly did not yet feel anything but numb — it was all too coincidental and Henry was being sheerly ridiculous and everything was just unreal. He would have been quite content to die without having to face anyone from Sodor again. Anyway, there was no use caring much about Henry's absurd proposition. Surely nothing would come of it.

But after waiting some moments he noticed that the Sodor brakevan he'd left out of the way was now close enough for the hoarse, half-broken voices of some of the yard's residents to hiss and sneer at him.

He'd not have thought it would much matter, leaving the van there. He remembered NWR goods stock for quite a rowdy, mouthy lot and so he'd have expected the brakevan to hold his own, give as good as he got, and even to rather enjoy lording his present employment and running condition over the wretches.

But that wasn't what was happening at all. The brakevan seemed to have nothing to say for himself. Duck couldn't make out what the yard residents were growling at him but he knew them well enough to guess that, left unchecked, it grew more vicious, not less.

He rolled forward — he'd opened his regulator without alerting his driver and the young man was startled as they set off, but he caught on quickly. It was the dynamic they had fallen into long before during the course of Duck's interminable stay in this place. The driver then got down and coupled them, again without prompting.

For Duck had got a surprise, now that he saw the brakevan at close quarters.

"You're a 'Toad'!" he gasped.

The mild, friendly face peered back at him, with a broad smile that Duck hadn't seen in decades.

"These days, sir, you might say I am *the* Toad, in a manner of speaking. Seeing as I am the last of my kind still in service."

"Oh," said Duck, with a blank expression that concealed any grief he might still be able to feel. "Yes, there must be very few Westerners from our day left."

"There's another, Mr. Montague, if you don't mind me mentioning. My engine Oliver is a 1400 class, and he has an autocoach too, and together we're all on Sodor carrying on the Great Western way."

Duck frowned. "I never said my name was Montague."

"Isn't it?" asked Toad, serene.

Duck, still frowning, pulled them away, back to headquarters. This was too far away for the condemned vehicles to make themselves heard and even if they could, they probably wouldn't have jeered so openly in front of their owner.

There is a lot of discretion in a scrapyard as to who is broken up immediately, and who gets to wait around in hope of some miraculous rescue.

Duck would have been well prepared to sit in silence. But the Toads were always known to be chatty unless their engine ordered them off it... and somehow Duck didn't have it in him.

"I do apologise, sir, if I was too familiar. I feel I know you, as I've heard you spoken of so much. Especially by Mr. Donald and Mr. Douglas."

Duck closed his eyes. Oh, he ought to have asked Toad to hold his peace. It had been hard enough to see Henry, and especially Edward.

But now Toad was speaking of probably his best friends on the island and just to hear their names made them at once feel vivid and present. "How are they?" he asked dully.

It was a silly question. He knew. Before Toad even answered, he knew. Donald and Douglas defied the rules of engine life. Of course they were still alive — of course they were still together — of course they were still hale and hearty. They had their branch line, their little place to keep their home and heritage alive. They had, it seemed, even found another Western tank engine to pal around with.

Half of Duck's life had been one object lesson after another about the grim nature of the world, how abandonment and heartbreak were the inevitable end for all their kind.

But Donald and Douglas still hadn't succumbed to it, not even close. And as Toad briefly painted a picture of their current doings, Duck felt... just a little...

Angry.

It was stupid. It wasn't fair of him. He had liked the Caledonians very well — if they'd had more time together, he would have undoubtedly come to love them like brothers.

No, it was better that he never returned to Sodor. It had already been a mess when he'd departed, and if he returned now — as sour and hard as he'd become — he'd surely only destroy what good was left.

"I'm glad to hear they're doing well," was all the pannier tank said, aloud.

The Toad now blinked at him slowly, with real concern. "Their relationship with Sir Topham Hatt is not all it could be, I'm afraid, if you'll excuse me for saying. They have never forgiven him for sending you away and it comes out in all sorts of tiffs and grumbles. Heated words are often exchanged, and they act as though it's about other things, but really it's always about you, Mr. Montague."

"Call me Duck," said Duck automatically. And yet he had spent every day since leaving Sodor pointedly *not* asking to be called that, and he regretted his stupidity at once. Brunel, if only they would all leave. It was confusing to have them there, the past and present colliding and becoming tangled, and Duck had never had much tolerance for confusion. "Speaking of the Fat Controller, how did they ever get him to write off Edward, anyway?"

"Oh, that is a long story, Mr. Duck, and you had better hear it from someone you know and trust. Begging your pardon, but if I told you, I doubt you'd believe me."

"I assume a meteor must have come from the sky and flattened Gordon into the earth, first."

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. Gordon is still intact and well."

"Well," said Duck coolly, "there's one mercy, anyway."

Henry returned before the men emerged — Henry, and Edward too, now on the rails coupled behind the flatbed. Apparently the big green engine had refused to leave Edward alone by the river. Duck braced himself as Henry pulled Edward alongside him, anticipating exactly what happened, which was for the older engine to eye him wistfully.

"Oh, Duck," he said. "You really must go back in Henry's place."

"That's not my decision."

"Oh have a little gumption, Duck," called Henry, from further down their line.

This was meant to bait Duck — and it worked, a little. The idea of *Henry* telling *him* to have a little gumption! Duck had given up a lot of things since leaving Sodor, indeed since that long-ago time he'd left Paddington, but there was such a thing as one's last shred of self-respect. "Gumption indeed! That's a word for it, I suppose. If the Fat Controller saw me coming back he'd be more likely to call me a bad penny."

"You're not a bad penny," scoffed Henry. "He's gone and done what you asked him to all those years ago, hasn't he? It's clear now that you're not a troublemaker and Gordon hasn't a wheel to run on. Now, you'll have to put up with a few thundering orations from *him* before it blows over. But I should think it's well worth it, to have a chance to be useful."

Henry's words ended with some bitterness... self-pity, even. A younger and sprightlier Duck might have made a smooth, passive-aggressive retort but the Duck of today couldn't be bothered.

"I've finally got what I wanted," said Edward quietly... not able to meet his eye, when Duck looked at him. "It wouldn't be right for you to still have lost everything, now that there's a chance to make it right."

Duck gave a little laugh. "That depends on what 'making it right' means! I can't say my memories of Sodor are so wonderful that the idea of going back sounds much of a prize."

In his soul of souls, he thought he'd parried that very effectively. But Edward looked at him with muted yet growing dismay.

"You *are* angry," he observed.

Duck sighed silently. Edward had always been good at reading an engine.

"I'm not angry with you," he said, but the older engine all but wheeshed the assurance aside.

"You are, a little, but that's not the main point. You're angry with... everyone."

It was true, but Duck hadn't known the full extent of it and what a weight it really was until this very moment, when it was said aloud.

"I suppose it would be more surprising if I felt perfectly at peace with everything," he said. Almost brightly.

Edward gazed at him a long moment. Now it was Duck who couldn't look back. Edward looked... terrible. Every bit as damaged as he'd been when Duck had left Sodor, and older and rustier and exhausted to boot. It was written on every line of his face, and there were so many now.

And the worst part was that Edward was right. Duck was *angry* about that.

And he wasn't only angry at the humans that Edward had served faithfully for half a century before they had left him in the dark.

He wasn't only angry at Gordon, that great... gallumphing... bloviating... something.

He *was* angry at everyone. Everyone. When he saw Edward's face, he didn't feel sorry for him. Just as when he saw vehicles sick with fear as they waited for the torch, he no longer felt sorry for them.

Crunch.

The memory of the sound hit him hard. Prior to coming here, he'd worked a different scrapyard — the one London Transport had sent him to. One endless humid summer he'd often been left (with other well-stripped and eerily silent engines) on a siding that overlooked the road vehicles' yard. In the midst of a long hot weekend, one too hot for humans to safely work, an abandoned mid-sized lorry broke the stillness by roaring to life. How, no one ever knew. Of course once you got into the world of machines who weren't *an* engine so much as they *had* an engine, sometimes they did wrest control of their own power… but it still stupefied all of them who were baking in the white sun, when the rogue lorry began tearing madly around the dusty yard. It had been during the great petrol shortage so it was nearly unthinkable that anyone had left any fuel in her but there she was, roaring laughter and veering in wild circles, and without a human in sight. Duck wasn't in steam so he couldn't whistle for anybody, and in any case he was never sure he could have. He'd watched in fascination as she took a running charge into one of her fellow vehicles, then backed up in another rapid heedless curve in order to rush forward at random slam into another… and then another…

Just backing up and ramming again and again, bashing everything in sight.

You could hear the cars and lorries grunting and gasping protest but the only sound that seemed to register with Duck was each sickening ***crunch***. One after the other. It was the only thing that had felt real in all that endless stupid heat — perhaps in all that endless stupid decade — and he'd thrilled at each impact.

After about fifteen or eighteen goes she had been too damaged to continue, her radiator gushing out something that looked strangely like steam, her front end too damaged for her to ever see again, and yet she had cackled for an hour afterwards — loud, unrepentant, and mad. And they'd heard that sound on the air for years afterwards…

It took him a moment to come back to the present and find the others all staring at him. He mightn't have cared if it had only been the two Sudrians. But the Toad was still in front of him, gaze silent and serious. The brakevan had a right to expect better of a GWR engine and the shame of it only paralysed Duck further. He looked away.

"On my old railway," began Edward.

Henry side-eyed this but the words did, unwillingly, catch Duck's attention. When Duck had lived on Sodor he had talked as often as he could about *his* old railway — having, at that time, no intention of letting the memory of that fine grand era fade away. Edward had always been more willing to listen to his reminisces than anyone else and Duck knew that he owed it to his friend, the first time that Edward now spoke one of his own memories.

"Our old engines used to tell us... they had such a job, keeping us in line," Edward added aside, with a dry weak huff that served as a laugh, "for we were nowhere near as large as your fleet, of course. But we were large enough, and not quite so well disciplined as your lot, I don't doubt. So we quarrelled plenty. But we were always taught to never let the sun go down on our anger. If we were fuming we would be pushed to go over to whomever we had a grievance with and have the thing out, and if any of us were at sixes and sevens we learned to

do what we must to make things up before we went to sleep. Of course we didn't live up that principle all the time... I don't think it's possible, to follow such a rule perfectly... but we were kept to it pretty closely. So often that the wisdom of it eventually became clear, for a fine day that ended with resentment was completely spoilt... and even a bad day was salvaged quite comfortably, if you were friends with everyone again by the end of it."

"We were taught that, too," admitted Duck... a little unwillingly.

"And if that's true for simply going to sleep angry... Duck, think what a terrible waste of a good, useful life it would be to *die* angry."

Duck gazed at him, face very blank. "But, come off it," he said at last, forcing a laugh, "you surely don't think going back to Sodor will make me any *less* so."

Ahead of them, Henry whistled, a sound of shrill impatience. "For goodness sakes, Duck, he *did* say 'have it out'. Go on home and give Gordon and the Fat Controller a piece of your mind! You'll feel better."

Duck tried to look ahead, away from them.

But he'd forgotten that he was still facing the Toad.

"I'd be proud to go home with you, sir, if you'll excuse me for saying," he whispered, confidentially. "They'll be so pleased, they will — the Scottish brothers and Mr. Oliver."

Feel better and *so pleased* were words that now seemed to Duck to be from foreign languages.

No, none of this had anything to do with him. *Give Gordon and the Fat Controller a piece of your mind* sounded a bit more his native tongue — a bit. It suited that anger that he was too exhausted to fathom ridding himself of, while still sounding quite an exhausting affair in its own right.

And yet.

And yet, when the scrap-man re-emerged from his shop, Duck couldn't help eye him and the North Westerners with some prickle of real curiosity, the likes of which he hadn't felt in years.

The CME and Henry's crew all looked troubled, uneasy in their skin. The scrapyard owner, in contrast, appeared rather casual as he lit a cigarette.

"Ah," (to Henry), "so you dragged the old iron back up here, too. Smack dab and in the way. Great. That's the kind of efficient thinkin' that gets us far, 'round here. Well, Monty," he said, exhaling in a surprisingly steam-engine-like way, "I've made an offer, and these men agree it's fair play, but, well, all of us seem to have forgotten the Fat Controller's phone number. They seem for leaving it to me. And I say bollocks to that — *I'm* leaving it to *you*.

"So what's it going to be?"

*

That night there were two steam engines alive in Beckermet scrapyard, when that morning there had only been one.

When all the people had left, the operational one, the one still warm with steam, was parked next to the scrap engine. Dusk was already falling and shadows multiplied rapidly. Everything was surprisingly quiet. The two engines said very little to each other — so much had already been said that day. Only with the last of the light did the shunting engine finally address the sidelong looks of concern. "No, Edward," he said, with exaggerated tolerance. "I'm not having second thoughts."

He was almost surprised, himself. Up to this point clarity had never exactly been a recurring motif in his life.

"Mmm," said the scrap engine. Then, "I wonder if they've got back yet."

The sky was newly dark when the clouds broke. If either had been alone here in this strange spot when the rain started, he would have been miserable to the point of despair. As it was the downpour did little more than make them rather cross, and after an hour or two it was over. It left only the black nothing. They'd lost their sense of orientation in this wilderness, and so they were watchful without seeing, a little curious, a little wary. The night-noises were all wrong here.

It would have been frightening beyond measure to face alone but together… it was bearable. At length the scrap engine drifted off, the lines as well as that late creeping shadow of bitterness in his face all surrendered, and the shunter observed his peaceful sleep with unspoken pride.

He had done a lot of embarrassing things in his time. But one thing he hadn't done, was abandon his best friend to face the worst alone a hundred miles away from home.

Soon he too nodded off… lost, adrift. And free.

Beyond the unkempt branch, miles down the main line, another steam engine, coupled to an empty flatbed and a humming brakevan, stood on a wait siding with eyes fixed on their signal. The headlamp and taillamp in the drizzling rain cast a halo around the train but inwardly the engine was feeling anything but angelic. He was weary, his men were weary, and their way towards any relief was blocked by this stubborn Other Railway signal that seemed as though it would never change.

The brakevan didn't seem to mind. Despite their stranded conditions, he'd put in the time softly spinning a bit of doggerel that lengthened along with the hour.

Starlight, tell the daybreak that the wha-ale are dragged
No one even cast a net in that old po-o-ond!

He was *not* tuneful.

It had taken some while before the engine had noticed — he was suffering dreadfully, and sure that no one cared… and that he didn't deserve to be cared for. This will all do much to insulate you from small annoyances. But they had been still, and rained on, and leered at by the occasional rushing diesel, for so long that the van's song had finally reached him and now the engine's teeth were set on edge.

And the pool was fair dried up!
Daybreak, tell the moonlight that the eel are splish, that the

There was, the engine reflected hazily, a proper way to deal with this.

Some magical set of words that were cautionary but not reproving, authoritative but respectful, something that honoured the brakevan's own obviously well-developed sense of duty and pride.

Moonlight, tell the starlight that the
Wha-ale are shipped, that the
Wha-ale are shipped, that the
Wha-ale

"Can you *stop that*," he hissed.

He felt bad the instant the song stopped. Yard manner, where had his gone? It was getting harder to ignore his own tiredness; this was already further than he'd travelled in years. Worse, Vicarstown bridge was still hours and hours and hours away and he was almost starting to long for rather than to dread reaching it. Was the Train Control apparatus he'd been given working properly? He blinked away the water streaming into his eyes and sighed. He'd have to say something more civil to the brakevan later, make it up to him for snapping without necessity…

He had no idea that, at the end of the train, Toad didn't look upset at all. He flicked his gaze up to the stars for a moment, smiling gently.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know if you enjoyed (or if you have the number of a good train therapist to pass on).

SW!Duck's history after Sodor is of course an amalgamation of several 5700s' post-BR jobs. The paragraph in the final scene where Duck is hunting for the correct yard manner draws heavily (through our dark prism) on @greatwesternway's post analyzing

the relevant canon Toad-Duck exchange.

Next time - What *have* the engines on Sodor been up to? We'll turn to the POV of everyone's favorite tram engine to find out...

Chapter 5: Tightrope

Chapter Notes

Dear Friends,

If anyone seeks an explanation for the lateness of this chapter, well, school is out, democracy is dying… and yet, above all, I will point the finger squarely (geddit?) at our friend Toby. Dear old Toby, who had so little to say to me during the planning process of this story, decided that with about a third of the fic already posted it was time to pipe up. I did remind him that in It's A Splendid Life (still only at 30 kudos? what are some of ya doin'? i know many more than thirty people read it, go! drop a line! hit the button, at the least!) his alt-timeline self seemed rather content and therefore some might disagree that he was a suitable vehicle (*geddit?*) for angsty detours. He disagreed. We kept going 'round.

While Toby is certainly capable of rushing, in this case he stubbornly refused to do so. "You're having me rewrite the whole thing from the bottom up," I wailed, "***again***." "What's the hurry?" he asked. "I have a lot of insight to offer." Then he brought in the Caledonians to help bully me.

And so here is the result of twelve drafts. Someone get me a restraining order on this tram.

- THE AUTHOR

P.S. @gadgetini's Chapter 4 comics sustained me during these dark days, cheers 🩶 Check out this gut-punching combo of amazingly-painted "sandboxless scrapyard Duck" with fun memetic humour! And then check out the other one, too!

P.P.S. My thanks as usual to @angryskarloey for improving certain Scots lines. (I did not submit the whole chapter to her. Mistakes are all my own.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5: Tightrope

The Sunday after the Red Engine's visit

Toby had suspected something, before the rest. He didn't tell them so when the news came in, but if he'd had they would not have been much surprised. Thomas — jealous, as always — sometimes complained bitterly of Gordon being Sir Topham's favourite but the rest of them would have probably pointed to that as Toby's role. Of course Gordon was given his way in almost all things, but Toby's funny little train were the favourites of the Hatt children and that made Toby the only one among them who was a family friend as well as one of the Fat Controller's engines. Toby understood that he was a little bit envied and a little bit scorned for this. He took this with near-perfect calm. He *was* very lucky. He knew that.

But that didn't mean it was always so easy as the others assumed — the main line engines who rolled their eyes if they caught word of it being time for the Hatts' annual charter, and Emily who looked on wistfully at their departure. Oh, he wasn't *complaining*. It was *nice*. Lovely, indeed — every such little trip, where the whole family went to explore inaccessible coves and shores. Well worth the sacrifice of Toby and Henrietta's and Elsie's one half-day of rest. It was always deeply intriguing, once they were turned onto the disused western line, for they were really leaving the railway proper and all its busyness behind and so even for the train vehicles it felt like a holiday… indeed like a voyage into the unknown. And here were a new generation of Hatt children, already shouting and pointing the sights to each other, already negotiating in their unbroken voices over who had first claim to various anticipated delights of the day, the grandparents going through their ritual of lowering expectations on most requests ("We'll see") even as they knew very well they had arranged for everything that would be wanted.

This time, however, Sir Topham had been unusually silent. Henrietta had noticed first, and because she was noticing Toby soon — without being whispered a word — came to know it too. Nor was it some passing mood, for once they had climbed the rocky terrain and chosen their shore he had lingered in the carriage and had to be importuned by the rest before he emerged. Lady Hatt was soon rather cross: she told him forcefully that she knew he was thinking about work, and

that this wasn't the time for it. Toby thought she was right… and he blushed a bit, guiltily aware that he had been on the lookout for a quiet moment to ask the Fat Controller a favour. Well, at any rate, he didn't dare ask now. Yet, unlike Lady Hatt, he did quite want to know what was on Sir Topham's mind. Toby had heard from Donald about the Red Engine's encounter with the Fat Controller and he wondered if his owner were having second thoughts about that swift dismissal. Oh, perhaps the Red Engine had been a few links short of a coupling — Toby agreed with the Fat Controller on that point — but he had been able to pull respectable loads and mind his signals. They were in desperate enough need that it was probably worth putting up with any erratic little outbursts while he made himself useful. (They put up with Gordon and Henry, after all.)

The Fat Controller's brown study continued for so long, however, that Toby and Henrietta (behind serene, well-practiced smiles) began to fear it had to be something much more serious. Toby murmured to her, when their people went off for a short hike, that perhaps there was some manner of health scare in the family. Henrietta had pointed out that if it were so then it would not be only Sir Topham who was so spiritless, and she'd observed no sign of preoccupation in the others. They fell silent after that. The other obvious hypothesis was that the railway's financial situation had taken some heavy blow from which it was unlikely to recover. This was only too plausible… but there was no use speaking of it. They had no information on which to speculate, and anyway they mustn't worry Elsie. They mustn't worry themselves, for that matter. They were very experienced in the art of happiness. You had to enjoy the good times while they lasted, and make them count.

So that was pretty well what they did for the rest of the day's outing. Even the Fat Controller returned from their climb to the grassy outcropping in better spirits — better, though still less happy than he usually was, on these special days. Relaxed enough, however, that he soon melted into the Stout Gentleman, as he always was to them when he was on holiday. The hours passed with picnics, kites ("I'm too *old* for kites," complained Richard — before bossily taking over Ally's, and showing her how to do it), sandcastles ("I'm too *old* for sandcastles," complained Ally — but she let the others bury her and commence building atop, only to thoroughly disgust her brother when she caused a structure-leveling earthquake), splashing, laughter, digging, and the

children importuning the adults for a sand buggy that they could bring along the next year. "Whatever will Toby and Henrietta think?" the Stout Gentleman had asked gravely, and Richard had scoffed, though not without affection. "They'll be glad it's someone else I'm tearing about in, off-rail!" It was true.

All the afternoon it was beautiful, the sea and sky almost made to order. After the second meal it was supposed to be time to go, but they lingered, the adults taking quite a leisurely time packing up again, and letting the children run off for another game of tag. The sun started to sink and scatter fiery gemstones on the water, and the children shrieked as they chased each other along the shore. *This is one of the days I'll remember*, thought Toby, *when I'm left in a shed for good.*

*

The day after the Fat Controller visits the sheds

Toby had known even at the time he was only inviting trouble for himself. It violated his policy for a peaceful life — *stay out of it.*

But he'd puffed into Knapford yards to find Oliver berating Thomas, something about having sent off his brakevan, and — this was key — Thomas not defending himself. Clearly in no condition to. He looked a right state, actually, chalky-faced with shadows etched deeply under his eyes. It was such a pathetic sight and Toby had sailed in before he'd thought about it, catching Oliver up on his buffers and simply pushing the autotank backwards clear to the other end of the yard.

"But my brakevan, Toby!" wailed Oliver. "The daft numpty has really gone and sent ‘im to a mainland scrapyard!"

"On Henry's train? Then he'll be back tonight. Cool it."

"Tonight?" Oliver scoffed. "You think that square-wheeled wreck is going to be able to clear two hundred miles in one day? They've probably broken down already! With *my* brakevan! On the ***Other Railway!*** Would *you* be so calm, if he'd kidnapped that hen — that-that-that-that coach of yours and sent *her* off?"

"No," conceded Toby, matter-of-factly. "I'd kill him. But this is very much Toad's line of work. For all we know he volunteered."

"Bollocks!"

"Well, we'll find out when they return, so you may as well hold off the inquisition till then. It's not going to do any good to shout in Thomas's smokebox… you can't make him feel worse than he already does."

"Yeah, yeah," said Oliver, "I know he and Edward were friends, but that's no excuse for *stealing my brakevan!* Toad must be so scared," he added, a little crack in his voice.

Toby barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Oliver always did act like that brakevan was made of glass. Had to be some sort of passenger engine thing. While he had brought Toad to the island Oliver seldom worked with goods stock to have points of comparison and so to him Toad was simply a proper old van, who looked after his engines' interests in a gratifyingly deferential way. Toby, in contrast, had trained up in a busy harbour yard and he had taken the Great Western van's measure at once. Toad was of very correct goods stock (rare on Sodor, but not *quite* so uncommon elsewhere) with the correct training, the correct work ethic, the correct manner, the correct sentiments. They were authorities on correct safety procedure, enforced correct yard discipline, and, if you were ever a threat to their dearest friends, you could trust that your remains would be most

correctly disposed of. Toby had a healthy respect for the type. "He'll be fine, Oliver. Leave Thomas to me, I'll talk to him."

Oliver looked very sceptical, which was perhaps fair. But he seemed distracted by a related thought. "I should speak with you, actually." His voice was a little deeper now, filling with importance. "Gordon wants to make sure everyone gives Henry the cold boiler when he returns."

"The silent treatment, hm?" Toby was unimpressed. "Bit childish."

"Oh, it's not just a matter of not speaking to him. He's *never* going to be welcome again inside the Big Shed. That's why we need you — you're going to overnight with us from now on."

"I can't," said Toby evenly. Very evenly. Usually he was much too small fry to ever capture Gordon's, or for that matter Oliver's attention. And on this railway that was perhaps the most enviable position to hold. "I overnight in my own shed. Tidmouth is too far for me to be able to pick up the quarry workers on time."

"Just get up earlier." Oliver was impatient. He fully believed any problem could be solved with enough "get up and go," and, quite apart from anything else, his relatively respectful quietude since last night's shocking news had used up all his self-control. Now he was back on form. "If you *care* about the rest of us, you won't make excuses."

"It doesn't matter whether I'm there or not, Oliver. I'm far too small to occupy a whole berth if Henry is determined to claim his spot."

"*We*'d stand by you, if he tried it!" Oliver's brow was furrowed. "Come on, Toby. We just need you to stand with us."

"I'm sorry, it's quite impossible," said Toby impassively. "Why not ask Emily?"

Oliver's frown darkened further, if possible. "The replica?"

"If you need the help so badly."

"We'd only ask *her* as a last resort."

Toby noted to himself that Emily was now a last resort rather than utterly beyond the pale. Henry's disgrace was very serious indeed if it meant she had a chance to move up one single rung on the ironclad pecking order of the North Western fleet.

Oliver reminded Toby to interrogate Thomas about the brakevan business and then chuffed over to the station importantly… or at least as importantly as an engine can chuff while rolling backwards. Toby suppressed a sigh. It was really rather galling to have to handle an engine as silly as Oliver with ermine buffers. The problem was that the autotank cast an A3 Pacific-sized shadow.

Toby did intend to ask Thomas what on earth he'd been thinking but by the time he reached him Toby didn't have the heart for it. Thomas was a truly pitiful solitary lump of coal, downcast eyes not moving for a long time even when Toby pulled up alongside with a brisk ring of his bell. The tram engine rolled his own eyes patiently. It was Thomas — when he was in a mood you couldn't expect him to thank you, no more than you could expect Mavis to thank you when you'd corrected her shunting, or Gordon to thank you in… any circumstance whatsoever. Indeed you might wait ‘round rather a long time for lots of things to occur to Thomas under a good many conditions. It was sometimes incredible for Toby to remember that he and Thomas were

the same age.

But Thomas did raise his eyes after a long moment, finally taking the tram engine in. "Oh, Toby, I'm *sorry*." He really did look distressed. "I got Edward and Henry's train together so early, and pushed it out to the station cos… cos Gordon wanted to be able to talk to them alone — and then they sent off the train ahead of schedule. You missed him — "

"No, no," Toby assured him. (He *did* usually have a look on his face when Thomas made any mention of acceding to Gordon. But this wasn't the time.)

" — God, I'm an *idiot*. I didn't think. You didn't get to say good-bye — "

"Not to worry, I'm glad things went off so smoothly. And the fewer people that saw Edward, the better. No engine wants to be seen in that state."

Thomas still looked incredibly guilty but Toby didn't think much of it. Thomas was one to hang onto a hope, a grievance, or a grudge for quite a long while and apparently it was true of regrets as well. Toby had never understood that in the other engine. To be sure Toby had once had quite a temper but it had been like his steam, quick to rise only to the level needed and, once the matter was dealt with, equally quick to blow off — railwaymen approved of him as 'efficient'. And he'd been trained up by a sensible steady lot to always chart a sensible steady course between despair and exhilaration (except, of course, that one horrid last night on his old line, when despair had been called for). In contrast Thomas's circular, pinball-y emotional life sometimes entertained him, sometimes annoyed him, but on that morning the tank engine seemed nothing short of fragile and Toby was very sorry for him. "Buck up, Thom," he said gently. "We still have each other. Mustn't fall to pieces."

Thomas's gaze was very in-and-out, sometimes present, sometimes faraway. "All right," he sighed, still shaky. "You're right. I'm all right."

"You're not. But you will be." And that's when Toby, keen to do something practical, made his second blunder of the day. "Do you… erm… want to come stay over with me tonight on the branch line?"

As soon as he'd said it, he saw how stupid the idea was. Chiefly as Toby hadn't overnighted at Ffarquhar sheds in a long time. He'd cleared out for the older, smaller shed when Emily had arrived — a move that he'd never breathed about to the main line engines and that he had since come to regret. If he'd known that soon all the others were going to progress from being a little wary of her to outright rejection and exclusion he couldn't have done it. But this had been only a fortnight or so after Edward's accident. Toby had been coping with his own fresh grief as well as a great deal of extra work, and he felt he could only keep calm and carry on during the day if he didn't have to face anyone else at night. It was not the first time he had retreated down line during a busy spell and Edward had always understood, but Emily was new and sensitive and this had cut her deeply. He'd never really been able to persuade her since that he didn't hate her and, although on the whole they had a functional working relationship, the shed situation was still a sore spot… Emily rejecting his one or two proposals to return with sarcastic, exaggerated consideration for his comfort. Toby could only imagine trying to oust her so that he and Thomas could take over her double shed for the night. Well… he *did* have a wicked thought of warning neither engine and simply directing an unknowing Thomas to encounter Emily at Ffarquhar while he left the two of them alone to deal with the issue, but of course that was only a passing impulse of mischief. The truth was that he had to find some way to squirm out of his own ill-considered invite — preferably without sounding the fool.

It was a relief when, after staring at him for a long blank moment, Thomas sighed a reluctant no.

"Can't. Gordon's nearly at his limit already and if I were to skive off it could cause a whole big thing… 'specially since now the Fat Controller will notice. Thanks anyway. No," he corrected, making a little face of frustration at how long habit had cast the words in sarcasm, "I *meant* that. Really. Thanks anyway."

Toby felt profound relief but even so his eyebrows began to knit. "What do you mean the Fat Controller will notice? Is he going to keep visiting the Big Sheds, then?"

"Oh, yes." Thomas's voice sounded quite dull, but then "dull" had long been typical for him. At least his words came more steadily now. "I just took him over there. He was rather cross — nearly everyone was already out and about."

Toby frowned a little. "Better you're all running early than late, wouldn't you say?"

"'Course. He owned himself he ought to have been in earlier. Sounds like that's what he'll do tomorrow. You still need the tail of your train, I guess… give me a few."

Toby let him go easily. Indeed while Thomas finished shunting his return trucks Toby must have been quite preoccupied, as Thomas looked a little worried by the time Toby left, and told him good-bye with such uncharacteristic warmth that Henrietta looked askance at the station pilot — and then at Toby, who only gave a bemused smile. He'd talk to her later, which would be a relief. But Thomas wouldn't understand. He thought Toby, like himself, was depressed about Edward — and he'd probably be very stroppy about it, if he knew how wide he was of the mark.

It wasn't that Toby hadn't cared about Edward, of course; they had been firm friends when they'd worked together. (How happy those

fairy-tale days had been, when he and his had first come to this railway! The two engines had run the branch line in idyllic amity and indeed after a while Toby had if anything been in danger of finding life *too peaceful*.) But he was experienced with change and with loss and he had done his grieving long ago. If the first rule of enjoying life on the NWR was 'stay out of it,' then the second was 'stay in the present.' Nothing good came from dwelling on the past or the future.

The problem was that the present had all the sudden become rather confusing. Toby liked to know where he stood and in the past week he felt uncomfortably like one piece after another of the bridge beneath him was falling away.

And that bridge was named Sir Topham Hatt.

*

"I think it's a good thing," Henrietta declared, during their men's lunch break, after a thoughtful silence. "Don't you? He oughtn't have *stopped* visiting the sheds."

"Well, I don't know about that." Toby was uncomfortable. He was a loyal-hearted engine, never prepared to criticise their saviour. This was Henrietta, however, so at least he didn't feel the duty to smooth the thing over. "Anyway he *did* stop, and everyone's used to it. I don't know that the Main Line Engines can handle so much change, all at once."

"Hmm."

Henrietta left it at that… which was always a good way to pique Toby's curiosity. "What does that mean?"

"What does what mean?"

" 'Hmm.'"

"Well… it means 'hmm,' doesn't it?"

"No, my dear. You say 'hmm' when you see something your thick old engine hasn't quite got to, yet."

"Well." Henrietta grew huffy, in a mild, idle sort of way. "And what of it?"

"Only I like to be let in on things, you know."

"Well. I'd *tell* you… if you needed to know…"

There was a moment where, instead of pouting reflexively, letting off steam, and enjoying the silence, Toby instead noticed the creeping anxiety in his boiler. It hadn't gone away all week. Indeed, it was getting worse. Bless his bell, did the Fat Controller have the remotest idea what he was wading into? There was quite a bit he really ought to know… and no one to tell him.

"I don't see much anything, right now," he said at last, rather helplessly. "Why'd I have to jump into that argument in the yard, Henrietta?"

"I loved it." She sounded slightly dreamy. "It was like seeing the young tram engine I met all those years ago, back again in the wood and iron."

He chuckled, trying to hide how pleased he was. "I was hardly a *young* tram engine when you met me."

"You were old enough to know better," she agreed. She had managed to shake off the sentiment in her voice… most of it. "The trouble I had, ridding you of those crude dockyard manners!"

"You make me sound a wild case."

"No, don't put words in my mouth. You were never *wild*, my dear. But you always had such a *fire* in you…" Although on break, the workday was far from over and Henrietta recovered herself with a cough. "At any rate, don't go fretting, there's a love. I don't think confronting Oliver will cause you any trouble. No trouble you're unequal to, anyway."

"No, I suppose I don't regret it," said Toby, slowly. "I feel awfully heavy, though… and I oughtn't."

"It's allowed."

Toby's lips quirked — *it's allowed* was such an old reassurance of hers that it amounted to a bit of a joke between them — but he couldn't quite feel it.

"You've been worrying nearly a week now." Henrietta yawned. "I do wish you'd stop. You'll notice *I*'m not. If Sir Topham gets out and

about more, you'll have your chance to speak to him, anyway."

Toby was silent for a moment. She'd known, then.

But of course she did.

"I'm sorry to have worried you, my dear."

"You haven't." She was drifting off… a mid-morning catnap. "But you needn't hesitate."

"Oh, but there's a risk, you know."

"Mmm."

His face fell. "Aren't you happy, Henrietta? Just as we are?"

"What? Of course I am, darling. Is 'mmm' a complaint these days?" She half-scoffed, half-sighed. "Don't fuss then, dear, there's too much left to do today…"

She yawned again and was very quiet after that, until their guard and crew returned, and they were readied for their next job.

Toby let her be — they were well-attuned to each other's need for space. But he meditated on it as he puffed down the line, and he found that after revolving it in his smokebox a few times that he understood her as perfectly as if she had come out and said it.

He suspected she understood him quite as well, despite his saying even less. He hadn't, for instance, breathed a syllable to her or to anyone of the thought that had tormented him in his little shed, the very night after the Red Engine's visit. He hadn't *let* himself really think of it, till then, but he'd been unable to fall asleep until what the Twins would call "the wee hours"… when he'd finally allowed himself to ask the question. No one did know what had happened to Annie and Clarabel. And he knew that he himself wasn't going to find the nerve to ask Emily, he preferred to not be quite sure. *What happens to Henrietta and Elsie, when **I** give out?*

That was the sort of question he kept to himself, in the privacy of his own nights. Impossible that Henrietta hadn't wondered the same thing. But they did not speak it aloud to each other, ever — only ever around it, like they had today, circling round it, nibbling at its edges. On such silences as well as on confidences is happy intimacy built.

They had another trip up line that day — as well as a further jaunt beyond Knapford to take delivery at the Big Harbour. This gave them quite a lot of opportunity to hear the chatter going around the Main Line and unfortunately what they heard did little to settle Toby's boiler.

There were a lot of complaints about Henry — an awful lot of complaints, considering he had cleared out before the morning Express and thus hadn't been around to inconvenience anyone. "Is this all coming from Oliver?" Toby hissed to Henrietta, and after she'd had the chance to chat with some main line coaches she was able to confirm his suspicions. It seemed Oliver was channeling any anxiety he might be feeling about his brakevan into an admirable degree of enterprise. Or, rather, it looked as though Gordon had channelled it, deploying Oliver as a sort of part-messenger, part-thorn in everyone's side; the coaches said the autotank had been zipping around like an officious bee, carrying proclamations. The engines he sent Oliver to with marching orders had sighed, much put-upon, not liking it, having the heart neither to want to punish Henry nor to take a stand for him.

Everyone was muttering about Gordon's bossiness. Even so, they were unearthing all their old grievances with Henry, too. Snide… unreliable… killjoy… full of himself… Toby overheard all this with growing dread. He'd heard talk like this before — when they had turned against Emily. Of course, they'd never been exactly *for* Emily, but when she'd first arrived she'd been observed to be friendly and useful and their wariness had been receding when Gordon, still unreconciled to his fate, had been able to direct attention to every little foible the newcomer had. Soon her confidence was understood as entitlement, her forwardness was arrogance, and her fairly normal attempts to reach out and make friends were manipulative insincerity. The game had been rigged, after that there was no way for her to win. Today's chatter felt sickeningly familiar. The new campaign indeed seemed to be speeding along faster than the first. Henry had more history among them of course, but then again he had never been on very warm terms with anyone, except Edward, and that didn't say much in his favour as Edward's tolerance had been vast. Besides, this time 'round Gordon had Oliver, who was a big asset. Everyone (except Oliver himself) considered Gordon a gasbag but Oliver was personable and popular and this made him persuasive. Even the coaches were already inclined to shift to the new party line.

"But dinna fash yeself." At the harbour, Douglas gave a twisted smile when (with surprising accuracy) he twigged Toby's concerns. "The trucks willnae turn. With them Ah'll aye be Public Enemy Number Yin."

Douglas continued rolling slowly alongside his long train, scrutinising each axle and brake before he would consent to pull it. The looks of pure malevolence the trucks were shooting him made it clear that this was quite a warranted precaution.

"Coupling hook on the third truck — it's bent," advised Toby. When the men went to give the matter due attention, he asked Douglas, "Did Oliver talk to you?"

"Did Oliver talk to me? I cannae tell ye when that wee tank engine *isnae* trying to stuff some nonsense intae ma boiler."

Toby noticed the dodge. "And? Are you going to be staying at the Big Sheds?"

"I told Ollie I can come the nicht — as it's not oot ae ma way." Toby kept his face studiously blank but Douglas still glared when he saw it. "Only the nicht and nae again. Yin time, to keep Gordon off ma tender. Likely as nae Henry willnae return till eh morra so it's nae harm done. And Ah already told them, Ah'm never making any special journeys! I willnae be involved. The twa great thoroughbreds maun hae it oot atween them. Catch me taking sides in *their* fankle… !"

He means it, thought Toby, watching Douglas finally back onto his train. He means it the same way Thomas means it when he swears that he isn't ever influenced by Gordon's way of thinking. He means it the same way the Fat Controller meant it when he said Edward would be repaired one day and that meanwhile a well-earned rest would do the dear old engine good. It's no lie. He believes each word he says — while he's saying it.

*

Toby re-entered Knapford yards to find the sky again streaked in red. It was only twenty-four hours since they'd been given the news about Edward. Thomas was back in residence, albeit snoring on a siding. Toby reckoned that for once Thomas might actually need the sleep and elected to shunt his own train home.

Donald was there too, and he was well entitled to a rest before his midnight goods, but for the second evening in a row he was wide awake… and *quite* on edge. Toby wasn't sure the Caledonian was biffing his own trucks about for any purpose except the exercise of it, and from his grumbling it was apparent that, after his unusual consideration for the rest of them the night before, he had now unsheathed his tongue with a vengeance. He had just brought in a

train that *ought* to have been Henry's, he informed Toby (a *clang* of bashed buffers — and another pair of coupled trucks went flying halfway across the yard). Felt like he spent half his life picking up the green tin can's slack (*clang!*) What was the point in them having a branch line, eh, if he and his brother were forever summoned away from it to do yon grand wheezer's work for him? (*Clang!*) And wee Ollie, he went on grousing, was making a fool of himself (*clang!*) So busy gadding about and doing Gordon's dirty work he could barely mind the day's timetable (*clang!*) Donald couldn't stand to see him toadying up to that auld misery (*clang!*) An engine ought to have an oonce of self-respect, dammit! (***CLANG!***)

Giving his trucks a reprieve, the Scottish engine finally came to a stop and glowered into the middle distance. Sometimes, he growled, he wasn't so sure he had done the right thing, bringing that auto-fitted idiot safely over the bridge.

Toby might have taken this more seriously if Donald didn't bemoan that rescue on the regular. It was nothing more than blowing off steam.

But perhaps it might have been better if Toby'd had a bit of awe for the snorting, smoking tender engine, for it would have stayed his tongue before he asked Donald about his Big Shed-related intentions.

"When *Ah'm* over there it's after a midnicht goods. They will hae it all settled this or tha way afore I get in."

"Hmm," said Toby. "But you'll still talk to Henry as usual. I mean… you were so decent to him, only last night."

Donald snorted. "Ae course I was. Ye saw hoo he took the news and Ah'm nae heartless. But Ah'm nae brother ae his, to be called on if he's gane and gaed himself intae a feud with the Big Yin. He can fight his

oun battles!"

"I understand," said Toby. "We're all a little scared of Gordon, I suppose."

Donald hooshed.

"I'm scared ae nae engine! Ah told him off just last nicht, when nae one else had the boiler to shut him up — "

"Ah. You're already on thin ice. Mustn't push things too far."

"Chuff *aff*," growled Donald. "Ah hae *some* respect for him. Ye wudnae ken — "

"Respect?" It was his third rash blunder of the day but Toby simply couldn't help himself. This must be what it felt like, going mad. "Respect for Gordon?"

"Ye wudnae ken, Toby! Ye're well oot ae it, ye hae yer cosy wee life oot oon the farms! Ye wudnae ken!"

"I know he had Duck sent away. To God-knows-what."

Donald's brows reacquired the barely-contained menace that they had been fixed in for months after the sorry affair. Except now that menace was directed in full force upon Toby.

"Aye, Duck was a fool," he hissed… sad, at first, but the sadness quickly dissipated, and the anger mounted. "And Edward was a fool. And Gordon was — a — ***knave***." Another hiss — a dangerous hiss. No one in that moment should have wanted to be Gordon and to find himself alone in the dark with a Donald like that. But the hiss died down, leaving only a fierce engine, and not an infernal one. "And yet 'tis a hard-working engine's richt, to be a fool or a knave a times. A Controller cannae let a lot ae frightened teakettles pull oon his strings, or what is the Use in him! Nae, lad, 'twas yon Hatt who sent Duck away, and nae one else."

Toby felt his firebox had been doused with a bucket of ice water.

But you'd never known it, to look at him.

"You know," he mused, "I think I prefer how Oliver does it. He may be Gordon's engine… but at least he owns it."

Donald's steam thickened to the sulfur fumes that must rise from the pits of hellfire, his smokebox a truly incredible shade of maroon.

"Say that again, ye stinkin' wee matchbox! ***Say it again!***"

Toby thought Donald had heard him perfectly well the first time, and he kept his cool as Donald cursed him out in at least two languages. The fireman applied injectors to his furious engine with a heavy hand but there was a moment where Toby wondered exactly how long either of them were left for this world.

"Ye dinnae tell that to yon dozy blue puffball!" Donald fumed at last, once his boiler had cooled below the point of danger. "Ye dinnae tell *him*."

"Yes I do," said Toby, conscience clear. "I've told Thomas a fair few times. All this ugliness, it's no way to run a railway."

"Aye, well," snarled Donald, "there's nae one else to run it, is there? Ye'd best look sharp, wee tram, if ye plan to adopt each ae the Big Yin's enemies. That engine could roll ower and crush ye in his sleep… and that owner of yers isnae to be relied on."

Toby blinked owlishly, as if mulling the matter. "He's your owner, too."

"Din ah ken it," said Donald darkly.

They went their separate ways uninjured, Donald still fuming off into the dusk, Toby fetching Henrietta and the trucks to their usual platform.

The coach was wide-eyed with horror. "My dear," she whispered urgently.

"Yes?"

"What I said about how I loved you jumping into an argument?"

Toby's lips twitched. "It still stands?"

"Oh, my dear, *no!*"

Toby rang his bell and calmly proceeded to bring them under the station canopy. They waited for several minutes until boarding, during which the tram engine was silent and sober as a judge.

He only murmured again once doors were locked and their guard was about to whistle and wave. "... Are you sure?"

She shook with suppressed helpless giggles as they pulled away.

*

For all Toby's breezy attitude, once he was safe in his little shed, with no one for whom he need stay strong, he sagged on his frames with tiredness.

All night he dreamt of life on their old line. When his door was flung open the next morning, he was most disoriented to remember where and when he was.

*

The morning after Henry takes charge

That morning felt strangely hollowed and unsettled, no matter how many times Toby rang his bell and tried to disrupt the grey gloom. Even a few of the quarry workers were tetchy. Word had got 'round that Edward had been sent away and there were those who remembered him. One man was particularly disgusted on grounds that

he had 'thrown in' to an appeal long ago and he expected the railway to return him his money — or, rather, he *didn't* expect the railway to return it, and he was grumbling about recourse. Toby and Henrietta were frankly confused. They hadn't ever heard of such an appeal.

At Ffarquhar station they found an exception to the gloom in Emily, who was sizzling and keen. "There ought to be a 'fast' between here and Cronk," she announced.

Toby began to feel an ache in the smokebox that he associated with Mavis. "I suppose you'd run it."

"It would let us compete for more bus passengers," she insisted. "Don't you think?"

"And we'd put some sort of ghost train on the all-stops."

"Sir Topham could fit up Thomas, maybe. Yes — I believe I'll ask him about it, next time he visits."

Definitely an ache. Spreading now to his boiler. "You want to go running on the main line. And you want Thomas underwheel here?"

"I hardly *want* Thomas here," said Emily, wrinkling her delicate nose. (In fairness to her, Thomas's acid-spotted jealousy, when it wasn't amusing, was the most *exasperating* thing. Toby had been familiar with it himself, when he'd first arrived.) "But it would be good for the railway. More use than him sitting ‘round the Big Station doing nothing half the day!"

"Gordon wouldn't like it."

She sniffed. "Perhaps this is an excellent time for Gordon to learn to adjust."

"Emily," sighed Toby, feeling suddenly exhausted, "give it longer than twenty-four hours, all right?"

And with that, he and Henrietta and their stone train left her — left her very cross. Henrietta pointedly muttered to him, a mile or two down the line, that he might have shown more tact. Toby was a little offended, and asked if she thought anyone else, including *the Fat Controller*, were likely to be any more tactful about the thing should he, Toby, encourage her to run headlong into the inevitable snub. He had, however, no argument when Henrietta observed that snubs were something Emily could very well deal with. She'd had enough practice.

At Knapford yards, gloom again pervaded. The workers and rail stock were all out of sorts. Henry still hadn't returned, and they weren't so much worried (a Henry delay was nothing unusual) as dispirited. Thomas wasn't to be found either and the handful of idle coaches fussed among themselves, wondering if he had overslept. Oliver was also nowhere to be seen, although in this case Toby was just as well pleased. He hoped to be able to fetch his trucks and be gone without having to deal with the Westerner again.

It was no fast job, however. Half an hour later found Toby scowling. He'd just cleared away most of a siding only to discover that he had misidentified the stock buried at the end. It had been the exact sort of daft spot he would have expected Mavis to put something so urgent… but apparently the Thomas way was to come up with some even-less-rational storage system. *Where* were his blasted trucks?

Hooshing grouchy steam, Toby shoved the whole lot of them back into place in one go — only to find that the points freshly set behind him.

Now he was stuck on the siding with the trucks. The produce van in front of him cackled in his face and Toby fumed, whooshing and whistling. Henrietta, on the next track over, looked at him with concern and only her presence prevented him from cursing.

It was at this point that Gordon chuffed alongside him… slow and grand as fanfare.

A set-up, clearly.

The big engine didn't actually greet Toby, though, and Toby decided to return the favour. "You have the signalman trapping engines in the yard, now?"

"Mm? Signalmen, indeed." Gordon spoke idly but Toby wasn't buying it. Gordon's mild manner was no more genuine than his own. "Oliver tells me you are having difficulty arranging your timetables."

There was a long pause. Toby, who the day before had been so ready to go buffer to buffer with a testy, thrashing Caledonian, now considered his course with all due caution. At the end of the day, Donald was just another engine, and fundamentally a decent one. You could have a row with him without risking absolutely everything for you and yours.

Then there was Gordon.

It swiftly occurred to him that he had only to not irritate Gordon too much. He wasn't *proud* of the thought, but even the great Gordon could not possibly carry on a vendetta against Emily *and* Henry *and* Toby, and the tram took some comfort from that. He need only be the most minor annoyance of the three.

"Oh?" Toby said, as casually as he could. "Yes, Oliver was very kind to invite me over with you lot."

"I asked him to do so." Gordon was all graciousness. Except for that faint rumble in his voice. Like distant thunder.

"Well, thank you for that. Wish I could make it sometime. But I've an early train to Anopha, you know."

"I think," grumbled Gordon, voice deep with warning, "an engine as much a pet of the Fat Controller as *you* are could manage to have his timetables changed. It should be quite a simple favour to ask. Unless, of course," he added, overriding Toby's attempt to express how inseparably fond he was of the dear old chaps at the quarry, "you are more loyal to him, then you are to your fellow engines."

Loyalty was quite a watchword for Gordon, these days. These days! For half a flash Toby could remember first meeting the North Western's big express engine all those years ago and how haughty and self-important and… utterly normal he'd been. That was simply what the Gresley Pacifics were like, everyone back home knew that. The degree to which Gordon was *dangerous* had been a later discovery… perhaps even a later development. It was funny — Gordon was the one engine whom the Fat Controller took special pains to keep healthy and content and he was also probably the engine who resented the Fat Controller the most. Even the Caledonians, bitter though they were, hardly held a candle to Gordon's degree of suspicion. Toby didn't think the Fat Controller understood just how badly he'd damaged the relationship with his flagship engine when he'd brought in Emily. Oh, the Fat Controller was no fool as to imagine there were no repercussions and in any case Gordon had probably made free to air his objections and yet he really *didn't know*. Gordon himself was usually too canny to speak like this before the human employees, and the engines — all as anxious as Gordon, really — did not dare tell the Fat Controller either. Ugh, the truth was that Gordon could be quite sharp, when he stopped and thought his plans through. Certainly he'd

out-strategised Toby just now.

How did he get out of this one?

"Well, I think that's a bit hard on me," said Toby mildly. "It's not so easy to ask the Fat Controller for things, you know. Well — perhaps you wouldn't know, I'm not sure." He affected to sound deeply respectful. He hated to do it, but if it meant protecting Henrietta and Elsie then very well, he could oil up the big axle. "Probably he takes your concerns more seriously than those of us little engines."

Gordon *was* surprised into a bitter laugh. "Pooh! You would think, little Toby. You would think…" He coughed and settled again into his original line of thought. "No," he mused, "the Hatts have always fussed over smaller engines. *I* am held to a higher standard of duty." Toby privately willed Gordon to keep on in this vein of self-aggrandisement… but he wasn't in luck. Gordon pressed on, eyes cold and a little narrow, like a predator's. "I really think you had better ask. Otherwise questions might be raised about your… reliability."

My WHAT? thought Toby. He wasn't immediately sure if Gordon was referring to his mechanical reliability or his loyalty to the rest of the fleet but either way it was intolerable for an engine who prided himself on both. He wanted to whistle-scream in frustration.

"Let him be, Gordon," said a new, dull voice.

It was Thomas. Toby, expression still guarded, nevertheless looked over the tank engine carefully when he had pulled up level with them. Thomas looked weary — he'd clearly slept no better last night than Toby had, and he was taking considerably fewer pains to hide the fact.

But he was contradicting Gordon.

Thomas had a distressing tendency to agree with some of Gordon's thickest and most stubborn notions. But, even to the extent that he disagreed, he'd long ago given up trying to tease or argue with the big engine.

Toby watched with interest.

"Now, not *you*," rumbled Gordon. "You've always been solidly on side when it comes to a threat."

"Against a threat," repeated Thomas, still in that rather flat tone. "Henry's no threat, he can barely raise steam. What good does it do anyone to keep him out in the cold?"

Much as he really, really didn't care to rock the boat, Toby felt obligated to put in a word, now that Thomas was resisting Gordon's course. At least *someone* was. "He only did what he was told," said the tram engine quietly. "And Edward wanted him to do it."

"They've both betrayed the rest of us," sneered Gordon. (Thomas gave a start. Toby frowned. Gordon sublimely ignored them both.) "Edward was selfish not to hold on for our sakes. And following orders is no excuse for the counterfeit aiding and abetting a course of action that puts us all at risk. Henry must be made an Example Of."

"Punishing Henry doesn't bring Edward back," said Thomas. "It doesn't undo that accident and all its damage. And it doesn't put money in our coffers. It's stupid and I don't want a part in it. In fact, you know what?" Thomas seemed almost as surprised as the other two as he said it. He sounded like an engine waking from a deep sleep. "I'm *not* going to be a part of it. I'm not going help fill your precious full shed."

At least the stupefied look on Gordon's face was some compensation. Inwardly, however, Toby was groaning. Trust Thomas to take a good thing (realising Gordon was full of clinker when it came to "solidarity") and rush full steam ahead to the opposite extreme (direct resistance, mouthing off). The tram engine wondered if he could make a quiet escape while the other two argued. Thomas *was* engine number one so he could probably survive this confrontation alone… probably…

"Very well!" Gordon doubled down on his sneer. "Sleep out in the cold if you like."

"I'll not," said Thomas proudly, "I'll stay over Toby's, won't I, Toby? C'mon, Gordon," he went on, overriding the bigger engine's attempt to lecture him into submission (and the tram engine's squeak), "just let it alone — don't you think Henry's already going to be miserable enough?"

Henrietta chimed in, quiet but steady. "I just hope he and Toad get back soon, all safe."

This was all moving rather too fast for Toby, but he was not about to do anything but stand beside her. Hell with it. "Quite right, dear."

Gordon's face turned steadily purple with mounting rage, but whatever he might have said or done in revenge was left forever to the imagination at the sound of a quiet, tired whistle. It was familiar, and at first the little engines didn't spare it a thought.

But Gordon's eyes flung towards the slow line at once.

The train came into sight. It was only an engine and brakevan, the flatbed apparently having been left at its usual home further down the line, and the two of them were for a few moments only a speck in the distance. Thomas and Toby did not see at first why Gordon abruptly kicked off towards the station, perhaps a couple miles an hour more than was strictly safe.

But when they did, they set off too. With tremendous shrill whistles, and Toby's bell clanging like it was time for a church wedding.

"Fizzling fireboxes! Look, Toby, look!"

"I'm looking!" laughed Toby, left behind for a moment due to the need to couple up. He almost derailed from the delight and relief of it. "Come on, Henrietta — come on!"

"***The Red Engine was right!*** He's ALIVE!"

*

The two little engines were talking to (or rather talking *at*) the newcomer with great energy when the Fat Controller emerged from his office, frowning at the noise but too caught up in his clipboard to take much notice. "Ah, Henry, it's about time, I want you to — "

"It's," rumbled Gordon, "not, Henry. *Sir*."

The Fat Controller looked up and dropped the clipboard.

Papers swished and flew round his feet as he stared at tired, ochre, sun-faded Duck, whose eyes were locked with Gordon's as though the two had agreed that a lifetime supply of coal and Brasso would be ceded to whichever of them did not look away. "Hello, sir."

The Fat Controller's assistant steadied him by the arm to avert an alarming moment where everyone thought he might sway and topple to the ground. He stared at Duck white-faced.

Gordon's upper lip curled faintly.

Well, perhaps not all that faintly.

"Sir," he said, imperious, "I am sure we can trust that this — this *engine* — is not here at *your* order."

"No…" The Fat Controller sounded vague.

"I am glad to hear it, for if you had sent for him we could never have trusted you again. I recommend in the strongest possible terms that you order Thomas to remove this — *trouble-making trespasser* — from the railway at once."

Thomas whistled loudly. "Are you mad?"

"Quiet *down* over there!" roared Gordon… though a swift faint screech of his own sounded from his whistle before he choked it off. "I know I have trained you not to whistle at station."

"It's not 1957 anymore, you stupid sausage — where else could he go? Remove Duck, pfftt! Not if the rest of us have anything to say about it." Thomas looked away from the big engine, pointedly directing all his attention to Duck — and Toad, coupled up behind him. "How did you get here? Where's Henry?"

Duck, not one known to ever be at a loss for words, merely flicked his eyes towards the Fat Controller. Toby began to fully take Duck in — not only the rough, unkempt look of him, but the heavy guardedness he was engulfed in. His driver had stepped out to give the Fat Controller a note, the perusal of which seemed to have left their owner even paler than before.

"Henry is at Beckermet scrapyard," he said. His voice was hollow but he folded the note and deposited it in his breast pocket with apparent calm. "He has exchanged himself and sent Duck back in his place."

There was a moment of silence.

His delight snuffed out, Toby realised that they were still very much in the macabre phase of trading one engine's life for another.

It was Duck's turn to look at Thomas. "Henry thought I'd be more use here than he's been able to be," he said, voice blank. "I'll work hard to make sure he's right. But I don't blame you if you wish to… retract the sentiment you've just expressed."

"Don't be daft." Thomas (who had once made little secret of how much Duck's formality irritated him) didn't hesitate for a second. "We've all worried about you, mate. We're not letting you go again. What does Toad have to say?" he added, suddenly aflame. Toby was a little confused by this — it wasn't like Thomas to much mind the opinion of unpowered stock.

But neither of them got a chance to satisfy his curiosity.

"*Sir!*" Gordon really did whistle this time. "You surely won't *sell Henry*."

"You just heard," said Duck, quiet and flat. "Henry sold himself."

Gordon's outrage was blinding — and a wonderful distraction. In their painful confusion Thomas seemed quite willing to be blinded. "Saves *you* a lot of trouble, Gordon," he cheeked. "You've had Oliver scrambling about to make sure everyone would leave Henry out in the cold when he returned. Yes, sir," he added, seeing the Fat Controller give a start at this intelligence, and appearing to enjoy himself hugely, "Gordon's been making it clear to everyone that Henry may as well not return, if he *betrayed* us by taking Edward away." Gordon was trying to speak over him but Thomas went on easily. "And now Henry's gone. So I can't imagine what he has to complain about!"

" 'Betrayal'," said the Fat Controller coldly. "Is that what we call it now, when an engine obeys my orders?"

Gordon didn't blush.

"Your orders don't seem to hold much sway these days, Sir Topham. It wasn't your orders that Henry stayed at the scrapyard. It wasn't your orders that this *intransigent instigator* returned. This is a sorry state of anarchy. Do you intend to put this mess to rights?"

Silence.

Thirteen pairs of eyes, human and engine, were on the Fat Controller as the he tugged at his lapels, lips pursed.

"Yes," he said at last. "I do."

"Excellent, sir," said Gordon, with a distinct tinge of sarcasm. "The sooner this — *six-wheeled schemer* is dispatched back to the scrapyard he slithered out of — the sooner Henry is returned — then the sooner your authority is restored, and the sooner we will have peace."

"Oh," said the Fat Controller, as if mildly surprised. But the facade of levity faded as his eyes narrowed. "No, Gordon, you misunderstand me. The mess I intend to clean up began long before this moment. I ought never to have sent Duck away, and I don't intend to do so again."

Gordon's face was a cragged quarry of angry granite engraving. Barely-contained rage made his voice a hoarse whisper. "You intend to sacrifice Henry, too? For — ***this***?"

"He likes to be called Duck. As for Henry, I will call the scrapyard and make inquiries. I don't have the full story and perhaps — perhaps — there is something I can yet do for him. But Duck will stay."

Every syllable Gordon dropped was more rigid than the one before. "We won't tolerate that. Sir."

"I don't know about that," said Thomas loudly, looking aside at Toby for support. "I think a lot of us'll be pretty happy, really."

The Fat Controller held up a hand for silence.

Thomas and Toby eyed the gesture respectfully. Toby felt something inside his firebox pounding.

Gordon looked down at that hand as though he would bite it clean off, if Sir Topham were fool enough to leave it in range.

"Enough. Duck will stay. I've quite made up my mind on that point, Gordon, and I, ahem, 'suggest in the strongest possible terms' that you make your peace with it."

The Fat Controller turned his back on them and Gordon hissed steam urgently.

"Sir Topham!" he rumbled. "Take heed. You will find that your express service does not run until that engine is removed from this railway."

The Fat Controller stopped.

But he did not trouble to turn to look at him. "You refuse to pull the Express?"

"Let us say, rather," said Gordon, with great dignity, "that I *will* pull the Express, once I have reason to trust your — "

"Duck, will you take it?"

All four engines present blinked, including the silent, wary Toby. The

Fat Controller was strict and he worked his engines hard, but it was vanishingly rare that he did them the discourtesy of cutting them off mid-sentence.

Duck blinked more than once. None of them had ever seen him look so dumbfounded. "Yes, sir," he said slowly. "At least. I'll try?"

"You'll need assistance, of course," said the Fat Controller coolly. "Thomas? You'll help cover the gap Gordon has left in our timetable, I'm sure. Ah, there's a good engine."

There had hardly been any need to wait on Thomas's reply. He looked like Christmas and the millennium had both come early.

It was clear that he didn't even hear Gordon launch in on his spluttering and objections. He was too exhilarated. Toby instinctively shot a glance at the rails, to see if the tank engine might have begun levitating several inches above them.

"Oh, yes *sir!*"

Chapter End Notes

A *train*? A chapter featuring an actual revenue-generating *train*? Breaking out of *this* psychological drama?

It's more likely than you thought! Tune in next time for "***Double Header***."

Chapter 6: Double Header

Chapter Notes

2500 words? Oh yeah baby, we're back to a *normal* chapter length for the moment. Calibrate your expectations, this one is less than a third the size of last chapter's Tobyvaganza. Short, swift, and swee - well, short and swift, anyhow. Small but pivotal story beat.

Big thanks to @togetherness23 for this awesome art interpreting "Henry Takes Charge"!

-

~15 minutes after posting: Line edit thanks to @angryskarloey to clarify that the train does not run from Knapford to Tidmouth but from Knapford to Vicarstown (sweatdrop) Ty Jennie ♥

~15 months after posting: Line edit thanks to NOBODY to get rid of that clanking Americanism when describing the area around Thomas's yard. Why'd y'all lemme get away with that? Ya gotta tell me these things!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

6: Double Header

Toby and Henrietta and Duck, of course, were real stick-in-the-muds about it.

"Are you sure you're up for it?" Henrietta murmured, eying the condition of Duck's wheels and cylinders with some distrust. Her eyes swept along his undercarriage until they landed again a little higher, on his vacuum brake. "You need a bag!"

"Driver's already gone for one," Duck muttered back. He sounded calm, but not exactly confident. "As for the rest of it, I suppose we'll find out."

Toby looked shrewd, too. "What held you up, coming back? We expected Henry back the same day."

"I ran fine," said Duck. "They just held us up often. Henry had special permission to run on their lines. I didn't."

"Yes," said Henrietta, quietly emphatic. "It is *very* important, for anyone running main line to be inspected and certified."

Duck dismissed the concern. "I proved to them I could clear a section in good time. They were quicker to give us our paths after that."

"Yes," said Henrietta doubtfully, "but were you hauling an express?"

"No," conceded Duck. He was always a stickler for accuracy… and he looked none too enthused, either. Nor rested. "But we won't know till we try."

"It's not like he'll be all alone, Henrietta!" Thomas chortled with something like glee — something that alarmed the others.

"It's a big job, even for the two of you," warned Henrietta.

"You've got to take it seriously, Thomas," said Toby.

"I don't know if we'll make it over the hill," said Duck. "Is anyone in residence there?"

"No," said Toby. "Oliver and Isabel — they're an autotrain — run up and down the branch line during this time. If you're really stuck, maybe they'll send him over. But you'd have to wait till he's come to the top of the line."

Thomas scoffed happily. "I'll bust my boiler before I give up and have to rely on that puffed-up autotank!"

The three of them looked at him in horror.

But Thomas didn't notice. He was too excited. It was already time to start bringing the coaches to the platform for boarding…

When he went to fetch the first of them, he had to pass Gordon, sidelined on an out-of-use siding — and eyed with cold interest by a puttering double-decker bus. Gordon's fire had already been dropped, which made Thomas's own fire leap in excitement. There was no backing out, now. They couldn't ready Gordon in time even if the Fat Controller had second thoughts… or if Gordon were to reverse course.

Which from the look of him seemed about as probable as a pack of solar-powered, self-propelling trucks descending on Tidmouth en masse. Gordon's face was *frozen* in fury and, although well out of the way, Toby and Henrietta and Duck looked over the scene warily. As if they feared that the little tank engine might be gobbled up.

But Gordon's leer and growl affected Thomas not at all.

"You ***cannot*** do this."

"We'll see!" The way Gordon had behaved at the station yesterday morning — his harassment of Toby — acting like Duck's survival wasn't a *miracle*… All the loads had come tumbling down together. Thomas braked to a stop in front of the first half of the coaches, unaffected by the bigger engine's leering and growling, and waiting to be coupled.

"I made a stand to protect all of us."

"Mmm."

"If one — nay, *two* of us are thrown away, then we all fall."

"Mmhmm."

"The *scale* of this betrayal — for you to undermine me in this way for that jumped-up West Country hireling — "

"Duck. His name is Duck."

"You're no better than the other traitors. Keep this up and you'll find yourself where they've gone."

Thomas stared. A low burning flame began to simmer in his eyes.

"Oops. Think you'll find you're mistaken there, Gordon. Edward and I can't 'betray' this railway, because we ***BUILT IT!***"

Mere seconds after the outburst, Thomas whistled with incongruous cheer — and brought back the first half of the rake *humming*.

He was merrily oblivious to Toby and Henrietta exchanging worried looks.

But his dancing boiler did settle down, as he dragged in first one half of the express coaches, then chuffed off for the rest. Their massive heft made his dreams of glory suddenly very leaden indeed. His driver insisted to the shunters that they take the train over in three parts, that day, so as to save Thomas's reserves of steam.

The engine did not protest. He felt eyes upon him — not only of the personal vehicles lined up in the station's small carpark, who always watched his shunting moves, but increasingly of vans and cars further off, on the newly expanded street beyond, already noticing something amiss on the railway. If word reached the busses they would have an audience gathered to heckle them at departure. Thomas eyed sun-worn, calcium-dusted Duck. Well, they'd be able to move it, all right. He could move half the train on his own, and Duck was a good bit bigger and stronger than he was.

But he watched Duck's crew (*Henry's* old crew) fussing over him, inspecting his motion, frowning over this or that part. Belatedly Thomas understood there was no telling what condition Duck was in… and that they mightn't have nearly as much margin to work with as he'd assumed.

"We don't touch our brakes," Thomas's driver told him, very stern (and very tense).

"I know, I know," said Thomas. If he'd had hands, he would have been

holding them up with out-turned palms. "The rest of the train has vac, and I don't. Don't worry about me forgetting — you don't know how it hurts to be shoved along when I've got them on!"

"I know how much you and the fitters will all grumble, if you need to go to them afterwards."

Thomas was all sunshine. "Let's not need to, then."

Indignation rippled all at once through the boarding passengers when first Duck, then Thomas were backed onto their train. The stationmaster hastened to assure them that with two tank engines their train would run just as well as it would under Gordon's charge.

The passengers seemed to take it for granted that he was lying to them.

It was not until the Fat Controller emerged that the usual pace of boarding resumed. He did not promise anything, only ordered everyone to please get on board, the train would soon depart. But as they did, he went to speak to Duck (and to Thomas, too, although the latter was beyond the platform). Busses had indeed stopped outside the station bounds to shout sarcastic words of encouragement, and a muscle jumped in the Fat Controller's jaw. "Never mind about time," he said grimly. "Just get it there."

They promised to try, Thomas with a note of great optimism.

In point of fact, if Toby had not quietly given them a push from behind, they might not have even gotten the train going on time.

*

But Toby *did* give them a push, and once the train was started Thomas found it as heady and thrilling as he could ever have wished. He'd been on this train once before, a very long time ago — dragged unwillingly along the end, sick with panic and soon exhausted but compelled to keep up. (Another old grievance, whose ghost now gave Thomas fuel.)

This time, however, he was at the head of things. The world rushed by and curves threw themselves up at him in a delightful blur of speed. Duck's snorts were harsh and fierce, but Thomas's chuffs were rapid and joyful. The long consist of coaches, once in motion, were a force of unforgiving momentum at their bunkers.

At first Thomas and Duck slipped and lurched, but soon they found a pace that suited them both. Somewhere after Lower Tidmouth tunnel their wheels seemed to settle into a rhythm that was at first a little less fast — but there was an instant where they at last seemed to *lock* together and after that with each turn of their wheels they *flew*. "That's done it!" yelled Thomas, thundering along in triumph, and even in his smileless sobriety Duck had to agree. "Yes indeed!"

In his joy Thomas began to swing back and forth. It only got worse the longer they raced along, the blue tank engine rocking in a way that must have made his driver and fireman seasick, and which mildly terrified the crew behind them. If their newly-acquired engine still cherished any belief that he was indifferent to life or death that stretch of their run shattered it forever. It was rather unfortunate that Duck had acquired so much experience with rail wreckage — he had to fight off gruesome images. Thomas sailed along oblivious, barrelling both *forward* and *side to side*.

But Thomas's happy illusion that he was in control of the train's speed, instead of largely at its mercy, lasted only until they got to Gordon's hill. Here the coaches became deadweight, all their progress

dependent on the two tank engines alone, and Thomas found it took every puff they had to simply keep going, never mind how fast.

Years and years of unused anger banked in both their fireboxes came in very useful just then. Thomas saw vivid red for most of the climb and behind him Duck roared like an engine possessed. Even so, about the halfway mark they slowed to a crawl. "Don't — *sit* — don't — *sit*," the tank engines groaned, urging each other all the way up. It took forever and an age. Thomas's wheels slipped once or twice, each time making Duck gasp. But in spite of his horror the pannier engine held firm like a slow-gliding glacier, and Thomas would recover, and together they gave everything they had to gain one more yard. Then the next. Then the next.

Thomas whooped when they reached the crest, honestly amazed. He promptly spent most of the descent screaming so shrilly that the signalman thought they were a runaway and almost stopped them.

This would have been a great problem, as Duck's boiler was now running at too high a pressure, and his crew were desperately trying to avoid blowing off steam, for fear they'd need every ounce of that again once they were pulling on the level. In the end, they blew off anyway, and at Cronk they desperately needed to refill Duck's tanks, despite his large carrying capacity. He was leaking and dripping everywhere, a very wet engine indeed. Thomas's crew took advantage of the stop to give Thomas a drink as well; they'd never expected to make it to the end station otherwise. There was an angry face at every window along the train. *Gordon* never required a water stop. Dizzier this time, and with no assistance from the rear, the tank engines got the train off again. Somehow. There was fair smoke and slippage before they were clear.

The engines panted on to Crovan's Gate, which was a scheduled stop, and a worse start. Duck kept blowing off violently, which shocked and startled Thomas only a little less every time.

After they had got away from the Works station things seemed a little easier, despite how puffed they were. The line here gradually declines to sea level, so the start was easier and the coaches again helped them along. But there was an odd knocking noise from behind that Thomas was not yet *quite* too exhausted to ignore. "All right there, Duck?" he gasped.

"Er — not quite!" the ever-truthful pannier tank called back. Now it was his wheels that were slipping, even though they weren't against a grade.

The coaches made up for his lack; they were cross and impatient, knowing precisely how many minutes late they were. "Come *on*, come *on*!" they fussed, shoving Duck along, and slamming him into the pilot engine.

"Oy!" Thomas was developing uneasy feelings of déjà vu. "Stop pushing!"

"We're *late*, we're *late*!"

"Nice and easy, nice and easy!" urged Thomas's driver, wrestling to prevent Thomas from slamming his brakes. At the same time, to prevent Thomas from sucking down more water. The tanks were empty.

Fortunately, they were almost there; the fields had yielded to great industrial lots as Vicarstown neared. "We're almost there, Duck — time to brake!"

It was all on the pannier tank, of course, Thomas not having vacuum. Rollicking Thomas and his rollicked crew expected a bit of delay — they knew Duck's men were not having a good time. The two were

familiar with the ins and outs of operating Henry, meaning they knew how to cope with not having *enough* steam; this did, however, leave them inexperienced in the matter of having *too much* steam for one rather scaley, clogged-up engine to handle.

But a minute passed, and so did another mile. They weren't slowing at all. "Uhh — Duck? *Duck?* "

The sensation was awful, the push of the coaches at their bunkers no longer exhilarating. Thomas had nearly been a runaway once before, his engine brake barely able to hold a much lighter train than this.

Lineside was now mixed commercial and residential zones.

"Duck! Are you still with us? I need you to brake, mate, I need you to brake!!"

Duck *did* call back, and at the unexpected sound of his voice Thomas was reassured — for about half a second. "Oh," Duck rattled behind him, with amazing calm, even as his eyes started to roll up and his pupils began to disappear, "I wouldn't worry about that."

Nothing but houses and streets now. "Okay," yelled Thomas, shaky, "but that makes me worry more? You can see how that would make me worry *more* — ?"

It didn't matter. The unprepossssing, unroofed platforms of Vicarstown station now loomed before them, growing in size at a fantastic and terrifying speed, when —

WHOOOOOOOOSH!

With a pop and a jolt, Duck's safety valve went off.

That was something of an understatement. The noise and steam were tremendous. Thomas and the leading coach both felt an instant's danger that they would be thrown off the track. Duck discharged half the steam in his system in one extended gush that rendered the air around them grey and opaque. His boiler pressure dropped like a stone, and the vacuum brakes came on. *Hard.*

Cups, plates, books, papers, and people were thrown forward within the train. Thomas' and Duck's entire worlds became a smoking, screeching racket. Unable to see, Thomas threw on his engine brake in a panic… They were all thrown back as they shrieked to a halt.

When the smoke cleared, the train had stopped roughly on its mark at the long platform. Duck continued to blow off forlornly. Thomas wheezed, out of puff.

The cacophony faded to the tinny bustle of disboarding and grumbling passengers. Everyone looked cross, and a few looked sick. Dizzy people dragged wheeled suitcases gracelessly. Undizzy people went directly to complain to the stationmaster, who was himself upset to see the condition of Duck, for who was going to take the train back, then? Who would get him another engine?

Two of the calmer among the passengers simply walked the length of the train to their preferred exit, rolling their eyes as they passed the puffed-out little engines. "This railway," one of the women said to her companion, "is a *joke*."

Chapter End Notes

The line where Thomas is like "do you see how that makes me worry more?" is pinched almost word for word from *The Good Place* (a show that sometimes feels very relevant to this fic, actually). Can never resist a Chidi Anagonye moment.

Thank you to AngrySkarloey for some light technical consultation on this chapter. (They did not read the whole thing so don't blame her.)

Next installment is the most chaotic/incomplete part of my rough draft, so getting it in order might take a little while. But I still hope to see you next time for Chapter 7: "***My Working Title Is A Massive Spoiler***"!

Chapter 7: Thomas and Rosie

Chapter Notes

> Man, remember when this fic was getting updated every 1.5 weeks on average? Those were the days. I was spoiling you lot.
>
> PSA (very relevant to my recent absence): Fellow USAmericans! Register to vote/double-check your voter registration status! (And then maybe be glad I haven't been fandoming much the past couple months, because yes, I have been *this person* in pretty much all my other social circles.😈)
>
> With our civic chores taken care of: Fanart shouts! Lookit these two awesomely dramatic works:
>
> A throwback to Duck's crunch flashback from Chapter 4 by galinneal-dearg
>
> The Thomas and Gordon exchange from last chapter by edwards-exploit
>
> Aren't they talented?! 😍
>
> Speaking of crying over talent: BIG thanks to AngrySkarloey and CutCat for their assistance, feedback, and encouragement, without which this chapter would have come later and worse. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7: Thomas and Rosie

The trucks were cackling and jeering when Thomas came to.

Not cackling at *him*, fortunately. He'd just barely managed to chuff over for water and coal, and as he drank greedily he came to sharper and sharper consciousness of the disorder in Vicarstown yards. A three-domed, outside-cylindered, freckle-faced tank engine tried to

herd sneering trucks but they were one too many for her. They catcalled, locked their brakes, lied to her and then snickered in her face about it. She did an admirable job not letting them intimidate her but they *did* have her turned 'round proper. And they knew it.

Thomas watched blearily. He was cross-eyed with exhaustion from the hard journey and, much like when you might look at a brainteaser, it seemed to him that sometimes the real scene in front of him faded into other memories. Foreign memories, the kind you normally only access in dreams. For a dizzy minute or two, he could see her both in white and mauve as well as some other maroon livery. He'd firmly ignored most of what the weird brakevan had said the day that the Red Engine so loudly crashed Thomas's yard (and nap) — it had all been so nonsensical and had made his smokebox ache. But when he'd stayed awake all night after the announcement about Edward, much of what they'd said had come back to him, albeit somewhat garbled. And now again, every part he possessed now aching to an unbelievable degree, he all at once could hear the old brakevan. *Rosie was brought to Sodor directly from Southampton Docks. She went straight from being a part of a team to managing the yards on her own and she didn't have Thomas around to train her and demonstrate how to deal with the trucks*.

Then the fresh water at last hit his boiler, and these fancies faded once more into cold sober daylight. The odds that Gordon would have given in and made nice with the Fat Controller so soon were surely nil. The express, a train well over twice his strength, needed to make its return and Duck was too ill to go on. Thomas was on his own. The only help he had in sight was currently losing an argument with a milk tanker.

"Shut up, Zero," he said reflexively, cutting into things and easily ignoring the tanker's glower. "You're Rosie, right?"

"What's it to you?" she snapped. "Where's Gordon?"

"Laid up," said Thomas casually. "I'm Thomas — "

"Yeah, I guessed that."

" — me and Duck brought in the Express — "

"*Duck?*" squeaked Rosie, the milk tanker Zero, and dozen nearby trucks, all together.

"Yeah, he's back now. But he needs to go to the Works, and I need a second engine to take the Express back. Want to get out of this yard for a while?"

This was a series of so many baffling surprises that it seemed to stun Rosie's foul mood into something more neutral. "Fat chance. I've too much to do."

The trucks began to scoff exaggeratedly.

"That's enough!" snapped Thomas and Rosie, together. Rosie blinked and looked at him suspiciously.

Thomas smiled, trying to look as un-dodgy as possible. "They're rotters, aren't they?"

She hesitated. A nearby wagon blew a raspberry, and she blushed even as she scowled. "I can't keep them in order with you distracting me. If you've taken on coal, keep moving!"

"Come back to the station with me."

"I told you, I can't. I'm a shunting engine."

"So am I. Come on," Thomas encouraged her. "I really need the help."

"I don't know," Rosie began.

"It's about time we got to know each other!" he wheedled. "Anyway, I know I'd rather have your help than any of the tender engines, you know?"

Rosie looked as though she *did* know, although she objected, "Neville's nice."

"Yes, well, they won't put *him* on this train, will they? He's always faffing about somewhere during the day — and if you don't help me I'll probably be stuck with one of the Scottish twins. I know we don't know each other, but you couldn't leave me in *that* fix, could you?"

Rosie seemed to smile against her better judgment. "No… I s'pose I couldn't."

The humans had to wrangle things further on their end, until the stationmaster agreed, but in the end a phone call came in from the Fat Controller and Rosie was soon backing down onto the train.

Duck watched proceedings with a faint frown. It was really the first… *characteristic* face he'd pulled since his return. Thomas found its familiarity a relief, or at least he did until Duck asked, a trifle coldly, "What's wrong with the Scottish twins, then?"

Thomas and Rosie exchanged a glance, and Rosie looked away.

"Um, same as ever," said Thomas, trying to sound light. "But busy." *And bad-tempered*, he thought, but he kept it to himself. For a moment he reflected on how much things had changed since Duck had left. The railway's financial troubles had already been desperate before that period but he'd forgotten, until now, that they'd used to all rub along more comfortably. The twins hadn't resented him yet for some perceived role in the mess between Duck and Gordon. Douglas's truck problem had still seemed manageable… well, it was just as bad, but it had been early days and they'd all reckoned he'd win their respect in time. In short the twins had been happier. Sharp-tongued and strong-willed, but they'd been a great help and good fun. Since those happier days, however, Thomas really felt that he'd taken more than his fair share of their bad moods. When Douglas's train had given him trouble (and it always did) he'd come into the yard almost priming with rage and looking for any excuse to quarrel with Thomas. It was clear Rosie felt the same.

Still, it was Duck's first day back and he was in lousy condition. He didn't really need to hear an engine he hadn't been great friends with bad-mouth engines he *had* been. No doubt all three would be thrilled to see each other again and Thomas wasn't about to go chuffing into the middle of it. He had enough on his footplate.

Duck's raised eyebrows weren't so easily lowered as all that. Fortunately Rosie, even as she was coupled to the head of the train, filled the quiet. "Which engine here *isn't* busy?" she fretted, and shot a look past the station canopy to the shunting yards beyond. "I know I am! Oh, I wonder how long it will be before I'm back? If I'm away all day that yard is going to be a disaster!"

Thomas, determined to fulfill the big jobs he had that day, summoned all his possible tact. He did not observe (aloud) that Vicarstown yards already looked a right mess and that it was hard to imagine them much worse. He also tried not to be too jealous that her absence mattered. The truth was that his being away from Knapford yards all day was definitely not going to lead to disaster. A spot of disorder, yes — but the truth was that he spent much of his workday napping. "Don't worry, Rosie. If we bring the train back this evening, I'll help you with the backlog!"

"If you bring the Nor'wester here again," observed Duck, "won't you have to take it straight back?"

"Not me," said Rosie firmly. "I'll *have* to return to shunting, the minute I get back. Maybe Neville can help then."

"Who's Neville?" asked Duck, while Thomas's boiler sank.

"New fellow," he muttered back. "Odd boxy diesel-looking engine. Southern region."

"He's not *odd*," said Rosie, "and I don't think it's very nice of you lot to keep calling him a diesel!"

"I didn't. I said he *looks* it."

"Well, you've said it in the past — yes, even *I* know it came from you — and I don't think everyone ought to always say it about him first thing. He's not odd, he's nice. He's a tender engine," she added, to Duck, "very big, for a plain six-coupled."

Thomas was embarrassed. He always was, since he'd learned Neville was a steam engine *after* he'd already told most of the line that the Fat Controller had gone and bought a diesel — which among other things had caused Gordon to crack a cylinder. But somehow he was especially embarrassed now. He felt Rosie's account of the thing made them all look rather bad in Duck's eyes and, worse, she hadn't said anything untrue. "Well," he joked, "maybe around here being 'nice' *is* being 'odd'?"

Rosie sighed. "You can say that again…"

Her glumness reminded Thomas more of Henry than anyone else, but he kept that remark to himself, too. It reminded him that he had questions about Henry to ask of Duck, but passengers were boarding and he had to start thinking of conserving his steam. This wasn't the time.

Duck was just able to give them a push to start and soon — all right, it wasn't soon; it was a slog — but in the end they did get it away.

*

It was an hour and eighteen minutes before they dragged their train into Knapford Station with a screech (though with a much less dramatic entrance than the inbound train had made, on *its* arrival). Rosie was in a state of numb shock. She had *never* been run at those speeds and she felt she'd aged about fifty years on that journey. The world kept jarring and shaking around her still, though they were at rest. The coaches seemed to her to have avenged themselves for every peevish word she'd ever said to them by taking the opportunity to pummel her bunker the entire way.

And now the workers were shouting at her she needed to push Thomas ahead of her to the water tower. Apparently it was *urgent*.

Rosie groaned deep in her own depleted boiler, but of course she got them moving — somehow. She couldn't actually feel her axles anymore, but she got Thomas his water in time to avert tragedy.

Some days, she reckoned blearily, are more Useful than others.

Neither of them could speak until they were watered and coaled. Thomas, however, was upbeat after he'd had a drink. "We *did* it," he puffed, a gleam in his eye.

Rosie was not won over. "I should have told you to scram the second I saw you," she wheezed.

"I'm glad you didn't," said Thomas. "I couldn't have managed without you."

Don't patronise me, she wanted to snap.

It was the instinct of long habit. And anyway, Thomas *had*. Until the last leg of the journey had left him utterly winded, he'd pulled off an air of exaggerated offhand confidence, calling back advice and directions as if he had taken this same train hundreds of times instead of what Rosie knew perfectly well was *once*. One more time than her.

The sheer cheek of it almost made her want to laugh, and that was annoying enough.

But that wasn't his attitude now. *I couldn't have managed without you*. Well, he couldn't have. So he was being sincere.

Rosie just wasn't sure what to *do* with sincere gratitude.

It had been a very, very long time since she'd been able to work with anyone as equals. Something about his simple words drove them deep inside her firebox and… hurt.

All the sudden, she preferred him acting like a big shot.

"I oughtn't have left my yard," she grumbled.

But it was when she had drank her fill and they'd slunk to a siding out of the way that she really began to regret her small venture. The great express engine, Gordon, was sitting cold and furious on the siding by the big station.

Rosie jumped. She'd been too exhausted to notice but now she realised she had felt the weight of his glare from the moment they'd come in.

She hadn't recovered from the unpleasant jolt when one of the Caledonians came into the yard. She *felt* Thomas in front of her tense, and because of that suspected it must be Douglas. When his trucks bumped him violently despite his safe and gradual stop, she was sure of it.

Douglas ignored his train's warfare for once, too busy staring between the de-boarded coaches, the abandoned Gordon, and the two puffed-out tank engines. "Did ye twa…?"

"Just come in with the Express?" asked Thomas. He was aiming for

airy insouciance but a whistle and giggle gave him away. "Yes. And where have you brought those from?"

Douglas ignored this, his eyes still roving back and forth between heavy knitted brows. "And… would this be havin' awt to do wi' an argument they're sayin' Gordon had wi' the Fat Controller aboot Henry?"

"Technically," said Thomas, all chipper.

"The devil take yer 'technicallies'! Give an engine a straight answer."

"I mean technically they're arguing about Duck, not Henry."

"*DUCK?*"

"Duck's back in Henry's place. He's alive and well and he and I took the Express in this morning because Gordon wanted to, I dunno, stop work until the Fat Controller sent him away again."

"Until he *sent him away again?!*"

"Right. So it seems like the Fat Controller's taken away his train."

Thomas said this with a touch of vicious relish, but Douglas lit up, for a moment completely ignoring the Gordon matter.

"Duck! Alive! And back!" There was real delight in Douglas's voice and

for a moment Rosie felt stupid for having so often shrank within herself at the sound of his deep-toned whistle. "Wait till I tell Donnie…"

"I mean," said Thomas, "he's alive, but maybe not so well. The train out was hard on his system. But it seemed like he could make it to the Works under his own steam."

"Haud yer wheest. *Duck* took the Express in?"

"Not by himself," said Thomas, with an audible roll of his eyes. "He and I took it together."

Douglas's eyes were back to puzzling things out. "And ye and Rosie brought it back?"

"Right!" Thomas was chipper. "And it was great!"

*It was **NOT** great*, Rosie wanted to say. But an axle had just seized up again and the sudden pain of it prevented her from piping up. So, bleary and incredulous, she only stared at the back of Thomas's bunker.

Meanwhile the Caledonian looked at Thomas with what seemed to be an entirely new respect. "Aye, that'll be yin in the headlamp for Gordon." He sounded wary. "Chuff lightly or ye'll be the next yin sent awa."

"I'd like to see him try. I'm not going anywhere, and Duck isn't either."

It sounded boastful and even deluded.

Rosie envied that confidence, however. It didn't sound like he was faking it.

And she had not even stopped to consider, while she had been chivvied onto the train back at Vicarstown, that she'd be risking a run-in with *Gordon*. She hadn't known the story at all, and thought he'd simply been ill or injured. This was an upstaging! For an awful moment her boiler flashed, far far too hot, and Rosie groaned quietly to herself. It took her several minutes before she dared to shoot a look at Gordon, and her whistle squeaked when she discovered him glaring at them.

For a few minutes, she missed the torture chamber they called her yard more than she'd ever thought possible.

She'd go *a million more rounds* with the terrible trucks before looking on that glare ever again.

Partly from timidity, and partly from real curiosity, she began to creep a bit deeper into the sidings. Out of the great dragon's line of sight. This yard was smaller and a fair bit slower and sleepier than Vicarstown, which itself was no very grand place (small enough that it could be staffed by one tank engine on her own — it *oughtn't* be, but it *could*). But behind her she could hear a whole group of locomotive voices: Thomas, Douglas, Gordon, one or two she didn't recognise. She wasn't surprised — in theory. The western half of this railway had all but one of the branch lines and therefore it was here that the North Western engines' social life centered. Rosie had felt terribly isolated from things at her own faraway station, always hearing what little gossip was to be had second- or third-wheel, and wanting bitterly to be more a part of things.

Yet here she was now. When we have become all too used to disappointment, there is a moment of panic if we are, out of the blue, offered exactly what we've longed for. Rosie did not yet dare stick with Thomas as whatever-it-was went on near the station. She might have recovered and quietly gone back over, but then she spotted the Fat Controller among the lot and she doubled down on her retreat. Better to look industrious.

She began putting away the train Douglas had dropped off, and the voices behind her faded as she determined that it was in fact essential to this operation that she re-organise some of the sitting stock. Soon, it was a lot of the sitting stock. There were more chuffs and whistles from the main line but Rosie was too focussed on her self-appointed task to take notice.

After a while Thomas stumbled in, sore on his wheels, and whistled protest. "What're you doing?!"

"Tidying. This is the way you manage your yard?"

He squeaked and sulked a bit. Maybe he would have fussed more, but two very difficult trains had left him limp and winded. He mostly watched for a while, then joined in.

"It's not usually this messy," he grumbled, red-faced. "I haven't had a chance to shunt anything all morning, you know."

She wasn't buying it. "These aren't new deliveries — I remember sending some of this stuff out! Ugh, I can't *believe* the big engines are always telling me I should be as good at my job as you are? You barely have any traffic out here, and you're still not on top of things!"

This should have provoked a nice heated argument, but instead she

found Thomas staring at her.

"You'll catch flies like that," Rosie told him tartly.

"The train engines are always telling *me* that they like *you* better!"

"Wait." She was flabbergasted. "No way. No they don't. They're always complaining that I can't keep the trucks in order. Well, I mean, they're not even… wrong."

"Yeah," agreed Thomas, blunt. "But I didn't really know that till I saw for myself. Anyway, I do… forget things, sometimes. 'Course, no one ever remembers when I go years without making a mistake! But, I — well, I get *so* bored sometimes that it's like I go half-mad for a while and then I'll mix up a bunch of trains in a row. They don't like that I mouth off to them, either."

"Oh, but they say *I'm* troublesome that way, too. I'm not afraid to tell them off when they try to boss me around, let me tell you!"

Thomas was slowly breaking into a grin. "I can't believe I've spent all this time hating you for being another goody two brakes."

"I can't believe it either!" Rosie was growing wroth. "*I* hated *you.* Ugh, I've felt so stupid and, and, and so — *useless*, thinking you were over here being the perfect shunter and all."

Thomas laughed.

"*Big engines*," he hissed to her. "I'm telling you. They're the worst!" Then he had chuffed off, peeping his whistle as if to cheek off the entire fleet.

His chortling was infectious. She'd been unable to resist the fun of it and they had a good hour sorting things out — and then their drivers were anxious that they take things easy until their next big train and wouldn't let them go any longer. But they would have if they could. Rosie didn't get confused by the trucks once; having an ally and a second pair of eyes made all the difference. Sharing the work made it feel more like play than it had in a long, long time.

Afterwards, during their long late "lunch break," she again marvelled aloud at how very little seemed to go on at Knapford. "Nothing's been dropped off here since Douglas came in. Gosh. I'd be so bored if I were stuck here every day!"

"Probably," agreed Thomas. "You have exchange traffic with the Other Railway over there, I s'pose."

"Yeah. Diesels come in every hour or two, all day and night." She eyed him dourly. "*Real* diesels. Not like poor Neville."

"Kind of interesting. What're they like?"

"Oilrags. Honestly."

"Sounds about right."

"Not *all* diesels are like that," she hastened to add. Sodor engines were awfully provincial in some ways. "This lot I'm dealing with right now

are rotten. They look down on this railway. Say all sorts of nasty things. But I worked with diesel shunters back home, they were fine. They're just normal engines. Say, are you related to the E2s? You look a lot like them."

It turned out he *was* one. But he looked a bit shifty as he confirmed it.

"We worked with most of the lot at Southampton Docks!" Rosie whistled, pleased at this unexpected small sliver of home to hold on to. "Now I think about it, I guess I always knew they had a classmate who was sent up north."

"Me. That was for the first war."

"Oh wow. My lot came from the States to help in the second one. We were brand-new, your siblings taught us everything we knew. You know, that's kind of neat? We still would have met even if we'd never come to Sodor."

"I was never at Southampton. That was after I left."

"But you would have been, if you hadn't been sent here. That's insane, isn't it? You'd have liked it, you know. No lazing about there of course — it was busier than Vicarstown even — operations day and night. But there were ever so many more engines around. The E2s always looked after us, and they were so funny! And the lorries and the tugboats were great too. We had such fun, after the bombing and everything was over."

Thomas didn't seem all that keen on the subject. But he didn't actually stop Rosie from talking excitedly and at some length, sketching aloud a detailed picture of what life had been like at home. The happy memories gave her a fresh enthusiasm, a strength that she hadn't felt

for years.

"… well, not all the big ships were so very friendly. Some were very grand and stand-offish. Wouldn't be spoken to at all. But some loved to come in all hearty and well-laden, would have been ashamed to drop in without some news or stories or songs to share… And every fortnight there'd be some fresh joke or game going 'round the whole yard… *I didn't know how good I had it,*" she realised aloud. "I thought it was just a very ordinary sort of life, you know, with too much trouble and not nearly enough of the nice things, but it was just *ordinary,* an ordinary life with us all together, and then — "

She broke off. There was never any point dwelling on all that had come next, and there was even less point while on such a fun little half-holiday from her hated, hateful, lonely assignment at Vicarstown.

But Thomas, who had said uncharacteristically little through this one-sided conversation, now chimed in. "My first driver used to say that the problem with the good old days is, you don't know you're in them till they're gone."

She was able to laugh a little then. It was pleasant to be tongue-tied, yet understood.

However, all too soon it had been time for a last top off and to couple back onto the horrid big Nor'wester service. The journey back had been just as bad as the one out, indeed more so because dusk began to fall and Rosie felt sure with every turn that they were overrunning their headlamps. And by the end of the run she was quite convinced that, if the coaches had yanked her just one more time, her bufferbeam would have separated cleanly from her frames.

But there was worse to come. Upon at last limping into her station

Rosie immediately received orders to prepare to go out for a third round. Thomas too, of course, but he'd expected as much, whereas Rosie had thought her ordeal was over and her shed was near. She hissed mournful weak steam. Her driver — bless him — had argued with the stationmaster at length but it had done no good. The Fat Controller had no other engines, no other plan, and their most prestigious train was not to be cancelled. There was no choice. Rosie's driver refused to hand her over to a relief man and insisted on working the considerable overtime involved but Rosie had still been almost too crushed to care about this small mercy.

Worst of all, Thomas saw smoke rising from the far side of the dark yards and correctly surmised that it must be Neville.

"You *must* be joking. Why can't *he* give us some help?" he demanded throughout their preparations, several times, of anyone and everyone. "He'd be a big help on this train!… then Rosie could stay and do her work…"

"Maybe because he's been up since four? And working since *five? **A.M.**?*" She was very angry to hear Thomas take that venomous tone, and angry with herself too. She'd been so caught up in the pleasure of finding another engine she felt so much in common with, and she'd completely forgotten that Thomas was the engine who had created most of Neville's misery on this railway. She was disgusted at her own lack of loyalty — and dismayed to the core. It could never work between them so long as the other tank engine kept talking this way about her best friend.

"He has to go back to Tidmouth tonight anyway," Thomas groused. "Don't see why the great lazywheels can't pick up half a train along the way."

They continued to bicker about it until it was time to run back round the express coaches and be off once more. After that point there was no steam left to argue and anyway Rosie *had* to put the issue aside.

They couldn't do that job without teamwork. She wasn't even sure they'd survive it.

*

Well, they brought in the train all in one piece. It had been an hour and a half of — there was no other word for it — *torment,* but the deed was done. Rosie was finally off-duty.

Yet, despite what had transpired at Vicarstown, she found herself sticking close to Thomas. The unfamiliar station was strange to her all over again now that it was night-time, the deboarding passengers were complaining loudly, and other engines were chuffing in and looking at them with the clear intention of congregating as soon as possible. Weary, well-shaken, and now struck by a new attack of shyness, Rosie stuck close by the other tank engine as in the dark he led them again to the yard.

At the water tower, her vision repeatedly fading into double and back again, she watched other engines trickle their way one by one. As they tiptoed past the grumbling passengers to put away their stock their eyes roved, catching each other's eye, and homing in to the water tower. Thomas, ahead of her, swelled with importance as it became clear that everyone was looking for him.

Donald was the first to steam over to them, his mouth set in grim lines. Yet his eyes glowed with a fierce gladness.

"You saw him?" Thomas hissed excitedly to Donald, as the tender engine eased into the siding ahead of Rosie. "You saw him, right? Incredible that he's survived this long! — And where's Gordon? I saw him and the Fat Controller having a few more words while I was here earlier — but he was still out here in the yard then."

"Fat Controller had Toby and Oliver shunt Gordon tae the sheds."

"Toby and — *Oliver*?"

"Aye."

Thomas's tone was very thoughtful as he repeated the names. Clearly there was some significance there, but Rosie didn't have a chance to crack the code. She didn't even understand, until the other engines rolled in to join them with their own inquiries, that Donald had been out to the eastern end of the main line that afternoon with a train, and that he had visited Duck at the Works. She was somewhat chagrined that Thomas, but not she, had grasped this news, when the two of them had been together most of the day. She felt twice as chagrined when one of the other engines to join them was a small wooden steam engine named Toby. She'd never even heard of his existence.

Although still half-convinced that she was about to expire on the spot, Rosie felt a limp calm start to settle over her as she found herself able to watch and listen to the others. They were glancing about warily, making sure, before they spoke freely, that the Fat Controller and certain other personnel were preoccupied over at the station. Well, this was the night to be here in the thick of things, that much was certain. It was rather like the day the Red Engine had blown through. She'd been right there, she had *met* him, and yet it wasn't until she saw the others buzzing later on that she realised that something very strange had been going on. And it seemed today was even more bizarre than Red Engine Day. Rosie, for all she felt foreign in this dark strange yard, began to feel pleased that for once she could be part of things.

One of the engines present was Emily. At her arrival the urgent budding conversation dried up at once, though Rosie eyed her with some interest. She was curious about Emily, whom she had indeed

seen once or twice at Vicarstown, but no oftener than that. She was strikingly beautiful and nothing that Rosie observed in her had justified the level of vitriol that the other engines used when they spoke of her. Neville's arrival had filled the gaping vacancy she'd had for a friend and so she'd thought of the Stirling Single far less of late. But her old curiosity revived as she and Emily exchanged hellos. Rosie felt a little shy, and heard herself sounding it. But Emily was perfectly self-possessed despite all the sidelong stares. The other engines clearly found it very annoying that she had chosen this of all evenings to plant herself among them. Even Toby and the Caledonians kept the small talk very stiff and very brief, and Thomas glared outright.

"How is he?" she asked Donald.

"Nae sae bad."

"Not so bad?" (She was either oblivious to Thomas's scowl intensifying — or she was enjoying it? Trick of the dim light, maybe.) "I heard he broke down. Poor engine."

"Burst a valve, tha's all. But the men say he's sound enough. Routine maintenance. They say tha's all he needs."

"I'm glad he's back. Tell him I said hello, if you visit again."

"Yeah," said Thomas, "greetings from the replica — that'll really cheer him up."

He actually looked rather puzzled when his sarcasm stopped the chitchat dead in its tracks. Rosie, unwillingly, understood at once because — once again — they had this in common: They both made a good many dark remarks, and they were neither of them used to anyone paying them mind. Tonight for some reason everyone did take

notice of something a station pilot said… and the silence afterwards was very awkward.

Finally, however, Emily had to go over to the station for her train to Ffarquhar. The Fat Controller was busy with boarding so this left them at least a little time to speak freely.

"Sae wha's the Fat Controller's plan?" Donald muttered swiftly, and everyone looked at Thomas to answer.

Before he could, however, Oliver, the Western engine, startled them all by suddenly rolling out from what they had thought were silent shadows. Douglas jumped and swore before grumbling that he hated when Oliver did that but Oliver took it in stride. (Rosie, for her part, looked on with eagerness. It had been years since she'd chatted with him during a day when they were both at the Works, but her secret admiration for the heroic autotank was undiminished.) "Hullo, lads. Phew. Crazy day, isn't it?"

"Ye were nae affected," groused Donald. "I was the yin traipsing over the east side ae the line and playing 'station pilot' at the Exchange Yard."

"Oh," said Rosie, relieved to the point of taking her eyes off Oliver for the moment, "you did some of my shunting there today? *Thank you*."

"Dinna thank me, lassie, if I'd had a choice I'd ha tackled the backlog at oor own line. What a burach ye're running ower there."

"But ye saw Duck," Douglas reminded his brother, his tone bracing.

"Where is this Duck now?" Oliver seemed oblivious as Thomas scowled to have the autotank steal his spotlight. (Rosie's small smile grew a little more distinct.) "Thought at least after all this I'd get to meet him."

"The Works," said Thomas, teeth gritted. "He wasn't in great shape after *he and I* **pulled an express**."

"So you were on all four trips today?" asked the little tram engine, slow and thoughtful.

"That's right. With Duck the first time, and Rosie the rest of them. She and I have *talked*, by the way, and we're wise now to your little game of playing one of us against the other!"

Douglas scoffed. "Ye both need to be played aff."

"Yeah," said Oliver easily, "you're both rubbish. Why the Works?" he added, before Thomas could recover from a splutter of indignation. "What are they doing with him there?"

"What they always do at the Works, Oliver." The tram engine, Toby, spoke with a distant, ironic patience that Rosie thought was maybe worse than merely scoffing at him would have been. "They're going to mend him."

"Maybe it's what they always do *here*," said Oliver. "At Swindon they had whole yards where they broke up engines for — "

The other four engines all hissed at him and Oliver took the hint.

"All right, all right, sorry. But I'm just saying, I don't *get* it…"

Rosie's feelings were undergoing complicated permutations.

Meanwhile, Donald wrestled control of the conversation with a grumpy wheesh. "Enough. This morning Gordon said he would strike until the Fat Controller sent Duck awa, we all ken. And Controller called his bluff. Noo it's four Nor-Westers since. They spake this afternoon, aye? What did they say?"

"Not much," said Thomas briskly, "they'd already said it all. Fat Controller says Gordon must apologise to Duck before he returns to work and Gordon, well, he's clammed up."

Douglas's eyebrows knit. "He ha naucht tae say? That's nae like the Big Yin. Is the Fat Controller starting to get through to him?"

"Not at all." Thomas spoke with the authority of an engine who had been putting up with Gordon's stubbornness since the days when motion pictures were silent. "Just means that he's made up his mind. A team of wild Decapods won't move him now."

"Controller's overplayed his hand," pronounced Donald, grim as night. "Dinna gimme tha look, Toby, ye ken ahm richt. Wee Thomas ken as weel. Gordon might ha apologised to the Fat Controller, after the storm ha passed. But ne'er to Duck."

"And even if he thought to try," mused Toby, "Duck's always had his pride — and it seemed to me that he's in funny spirits right now."

"Aye. Ye're richt aboot that. I wudnae ha said it in front ae the — in front ae yon Single, but the poor engine's rather low. He disnae care sae much aboot staying here that he'd let the Big Yin orate ten or twelve words withoot he'll tweak his nose for him."

Douglas gave his brother the ghost of a smile even as he tried to be stern. "Ye needn't sound sae proud."

"Who? Me?"

Oliver was still furrowed and fretting. He'd been interjecting loud sighs and hmms throughout this talk and now, since no one had paid him any mind, he went and jumped in fully. "But *why's* the Fat Controller going to have this engine fixed up, huh? He didn't repair Edward. What's so special about this Duck character?"

Thomas had already been losing patience and Oliver had tripped over his bright line. "What does Edward matter to you! You didn't know him!"

"I mean, yeah, but — I just don't get it. Anyway *Gordon* matters a lot to me. And the whole thing was hard on him, you know. You all act like he's no feelings, but it really gutted him, seeing his best mate left to rot like that night after night — "

Toby held back this time, looking almost amused as he scanned the other three as if waiting to see whose dome was likeliest to blow off.

Douglas got in the first hit, Thomas being delayed by the necessity of rolling his eyes. "Aye, Ollie, unlike the rest ae us, who had nae feelings aboot the thing!"

"Gordon doesn't have *mates*, Oliver," said Thomas, withering instead of heated. "He doesn't even have friends."

Oliver raised himself on his axles a bit. "He has me!"

Thomas scoffed. "Didn't you just shunt him into the sheds like an hour ago?"

For the first time, Oliver's stride was broken. "Well — yeah, me and Toby. I had to. Fat Controller's orders."

"You helped carry out his punishment. He'll never forgive you."

The autotank's smokebox was frozen but Rosie didn't give him time to respond. She was incredulous.

"You're friends? with *Gordon?*" she squeaked. She had been too out of puff and too awed by the older engines to speak but at this she could hardly fail to react. "***Why?***"

The Caledonians both choked a bit and she realised she had just risen higher in their estimation with that one outburst than she had in years of sorting their trains.

Even the cover of darkness didn't disguise Oliver's smokebox starting to turn red. "Coz — erm — w-well, who are *you* to talk! Aren't you mates w-w-w-with Newton the Diesel Engine, or whoever? Ol' Nitwit?"

"Yeah," said Rosie, still too bemused and tired to be properly cross, "but Neville's nice, and Gordon's — ummm — *awful?*"

Thomas appeared to be enjoying himself. "And before Gordon he was palling around with the replica," he stage-whispered to her. "To show you what kind of taste he has."

"No way. You dumped Emily? For ***Gordon****?*" Rosie was genuinely dumbfounded. All this time, she'd believed he was so clever and wise… "Cool. Very cool choice. Wait! Was that what you were doing earlier, avoiding her? You only showed your funnel after she left. Wow."

Oliver's blush grew hotter and redder but Donald burst in again with an exasperated roar. "This is wasting time! Any tank engine *nae* named Thomas is free to go and play silly buggers ower yon bad water too'er. I'd like to ken what *this* one ha in mind. What happens tomorrow then, laddie?"

Thomas looked faintly surprised at this, but perfectly ready. "Rosie and I keep taking the Express until the Fat Controller brings Gordon to heel," he said, all confidence. "Easy."

Donald's eyebrows knit as Rosie's face crumpled. "And ha ye asked her aboot that?"

"What do you mean — why are you asking me this stuff? Am I wearing a topper and tails, and not known about it? I don't give the orders. But Rosie wants to help too, don't you, Rosie?"

Rosie couldn't find it in her to reply, and the Caledonians exchanged a glance that none of the others could parse. But the brothers' scepticism crackled on the air. "Aisy," Donald repeated.

"Well, maybe not easy. But we've *got* to do it — haven't we?"

"None of yer double acts today ha run to time," observed Douglas.

It was Thomas's turn to start going rather pink but he held firm. "So? What, we're going to let Gordon send Duck away *again* so that, what. So that a train runs on time? I don't understand you two."

"We're trying to see this the way the Fat Controller will, Thomas." Toby the tram engine again spoke with that slightly condescending patience. Rosie was still annoyed by Thomas but she couldn't blame him for visibly flaring up — she'd do the same, if spoken to like that.

"Passengers are in an uproar," agreed Douglas, eying the platform, quieter though it now was.

"And the twa ae ye cannae go on like this. Can ye?"

"I can so!" Thomas was indignant. "*Certainly* I can."

But it was Rosie that Donald was looking on, and he kept at it so pointedly that even Thomas at last had to notice.

Rosie went red under the weight of everyone's stares. She wanted to be cross at all of them for assuming she wanted an out… wanted to be cross that Thomas, of all engines, was the only exception… but she couldn't. It was miserable. She liked admitting she wasn't up for something no more than any engine, and indeed being a tank engine and a *girl* engine at that (especially on this island!) made her three

times as self-conscious.

But the problem was that it was *true*. She'd seldom been so sore in her life, possibly even including the old days when her steel firebox would start to deform under heavy use. She'd hated every bit of those three express services, and the thought of doing four of them tomorrow — and then again, and again, for as long as it took for either the Fat Controller or Gordon to bend — that sounded dreadful.

It didn't help, either, that she seriously doubted whether she could do this for very long without something breaking, and the prospect was daunting. She had never known Edward at all, not until she had seen his train go over the bridge yesterday morning, but she'd heard his story and knew what it meant. Duck was a nice enough sort of engine but they were scarcely acquainted. She felt no particular will to risk her life for him. "I just," she began, not meeting anyone's eye. And then her voice cracked. "I don't know that, um…"

"She cannae be spared, anyway," Donald said, to Thomas. "Stationmaster ower there was talking ae the Fat Controller renting a diesel from the Other Railway. Tae cover a couple hours' shunting owernicht. They cannae wait on her to return."

That caught everyone's attention. Rosie gasped, and the others were wide-eyed and solemn for several long seconds. The very mention of *Fat Controller* and *diesel* in the same sentence was enough to cast a pall over any proceeding. Opinions might be softening on the subject of new builds — but they all still were very much of the understanding that, if ever the island *could* dieselise, the jig was up for them all.

"Right," said Thomas, abrupt. Biffing them out of their stupor. "So Rosie needs to be at Vicarstown. They're too busy to spare a shunter. But I say engines here on the western end of the line can do their own shunting for however long — I always did say. The only reason I've been kept here so closely is because the Fat Controller knew Gordon would blow up everything if I wasn't always around to run his errands

— and Gordon's already done that, so it doesn't matter now. I have nothing better to do than to keep covering this train. And it doesn't have to always be Rosie who's second engine, there's — " Thomas eyed first Toby and then, with a slightly longer once-over, Oliver. However neither were very strong engines and Thomas seemed to accept the reality that he did not have a hope of pulling the Nor'wester as part of a team with either. Rosie might have expected Oliver to be offended but the autotank was frowning in thought and didn't seem to notice the inspection. " — we-ell… there's Neville! *He's* back in the evenings. And Donald, Douglas, you'll help cover in the mornings — won't you? I know you're already stretched thin," he added quickly (the twins *were* — and were forever very vocal about that fact), "but this is *important!* Isn't it? Besides, if we hold the line for the Fat Controller then he can keep Duck and then Duck can help lighten your load, once we get past all this! We've all got to pull together this one time, we've just got to!"

Donald and Douglas were quiet for a long moment. They glanced at each other out of the corners of their eyes, clearly telegraphing some sort of silent brotherly conversation. The rest of them were puzzling out the twins' uncharacteristic reticence when Oliver, sounding restless, opened his mouth.

"You really think Gordon'll blame me?" he asked Thomas. "For helping move him back to Tidmouth?"

Thomas's mouth fell open as he gazed at Oliver, as if unable to believe that anyone could be so dense. "Uh," he said, "... *yes*."

"What? No. No! He knows I'm on his side. It's a mess but — I had no other choice, he knows that. We talk a lot about how I have a duty to look out for Isabel and Toad."

"Sure," said Thomas, tone harsh, " 'orders are orders' was really going to work out for Henry, wasn't it? Face it, *mate*. Gordon's never been the forgiving type. R.I.P. Why," he demanded, pointedly turning the

conversation away from the crushed-looking autotank, and towards the Caledonians, "are *you* two so quiet all the sudden? You're making me nervous. I thought you liked Duck!"

Donald snorted. "We did. We do. And tha's why we told him, we told him plain — "

" — right before all hell brake loose — "

" — aye, all those years ago — "

"***Dinna go atween a Controller and his Big Yin***," the twins finished in flat chorus.

Thomas frowned in puzzlement, and Rosie did the same. It seemed to her that there was some hidden significance to these words that the Caledonians laid such stress on.

Something was there that she could just about see… but not quite.

Douglas saw them frowning, and spoke a little more gently (and the unformed shape in the fog dissipated). "In the end, lad, the Fat Controller *maun* make up with Gordon. Withoot the Big Yin there is nae railway. Something will ha tae give."

Thomas's frown, catching the dim light of the others' fireboxes, was taking on a thunderous quality. "I think *Gordon* should be the one worried about making up with the Fat Controller. If we show that we can carry on without him."

"We can't," said Oliver. He still looked quite blank but he was at no loss for words. "You all like to pooh-pooh what Gordon does for this railway. Try to get on without him, you'll soon see."

"So far it's going fine," scowled Thomas. "We covered his *one* train — "

"Borrowing a diesel tonicht," Douglas reminded him.

"For a couple hours! The day after we lost Edward was harder — "

"We had to bring in a whole new engine after that," said Toby quietly. "You lot still aren't over it."

Thomas stoutly ignored this. "The day after Henry's Welsh coal ran out was harder — "

"That was — when we got Neville?" ventured Rosie. "Another whole new engine?"

"And the day after we lost Duck was harder — and *I* want him back for good. Apparently, I'm the only one!"

The tank engine had thrown out this missile in a blatant attempt to provoke a response from the Caledonians.

Who were unimpressed, and uninflamed. Douglas glanced at Donald — for all the brothers could bicker with the best of them, when it came to grave matters and grand strategy he always yielded to the older twin.

Donald only eyed Thomas for a long moment.

"Tis a pity," he said, at length, "that ye were nae so concerned wi keeping Duck on the island the last time."

The words seemed to strike Thomas hard — like he'd run into an overhanging with unexpectedly low clearance. He gaped.

"Wasn't much I could do," he gasped at last, "the Fat Controller didn't dare tell Gordon no, last time."

"Mmm." Donald closed his eyes, mouth becoming grimmer still. "Maybe. But it awt ne'er ha been Duck atween them. It was yer place to go and speak for yer friend. Gordon may still ha quashed it, but ye'd never ha been sent awa."

Thomas was still staring, slack and reddening.

"Donald," he hissed at last, numb. His voice cracked. "If anyone ever told you it was *your* place, to tell the controller to send *your* brother to the scrapyard… you'd take a running charge and put them through a shed wall."

It appeared he only dared say it because for that one numb, horrid moment he wouldn't have minded if Donald went and did it. But the Caledonian (while never denying it) only eyed him dourly.

"That isnae the same," he growled. "Douggie was still serviceable, I made a plan to bring us to safety withoot bothering anyoun else. And

he wasnae asking to be sent there."

Thomas stared for another moment. "I never thought of it," he whispered at last.

There was a quiet snort from either Oliver or Toby — Rosie couldn't tell which. But in the glow from his headlamps Thomas reddened.

"Give me a chance to make up for it, then," he said roughly. "You're in?"

The twins exchanged a final glance.

"Ae course we're in," said Donald. "When hae we ever bunked a job? But it's ye tha must do the speaking, lad. Fat Controller is weel used to ignoring the half ae wha I say."

Thomas had brightened. "Yeah. Of course! He'll be pleased."

"Keep yer wheels tae the rails, laddie," warned Douglas. "Just… take it train by train."

"What — worrying already?" Thomas grinned at the twins. "You sound like Edward and Henry!"

Rosie couldn't help a swift shudder (it seemed to her that they still had not even *addressed* how seemingly they had no prospect of ever seeing Henry again. He had fussed at her often when coming into Vicarstown, seeking sympathy while offering precious little himself —

and she had always served his energy right back to him — but the idea that he had left the railway never to return was still so overwhelmingly sad that she could not yet touch it.) Indeed, even the twins looked, if possible, more grim.

"I shuld ne'er like to explain to auld Eddie how ye were rushing intae this fankle," muttered Douglas, "and we stood by and let ye."

"*Let* me? I'd like to see you *stop* me." Thomas was still passionately focussed on his own, grander vision. "Don't fuss, Douglas, it doesn't suit you." ("You don't know him that well, d'ya?" hissed Oliver, with a swift grin.) "Anyway you're either angry with me or you're worried about me, you have to pick a track. You can't run along both!"

"Och aye?" A sardonic flash did briefly lighten Donald's face as he glanced at his brother. "The wee tank engine thinks he ken what we can do, Douggie."

"I promise you I'm up for it. We'll all pull together, and we'll show the Fat Controller he needn't fear keeping Gordon in check. It will make life around here so much better. You'll see!"

Everyone was quiet for a long moment or two. Contemplating how their wheels and axles ached, and contemplating these words — perhaps in that order. Rosie was sleepily aware that this little speech ought to ring hollow. There was no hope for things around here to be nice — she'd come to Sodor with those hopes, and she'd gamely revived them many a time, and she had long been resigned to seeing no improvement. Such a promise *would* sound false coming from anyone else.

So why should these words carry conviction only because they were said by a puffed-up, touchy, spiteful old tank engine?

Yet they did. They really did. Rosie knew after she crawled into her unfamiliar berth for the night she would hear those words echo in her smokebox again, until she fell asleep feeling… hopeful. Ready. Looking forward to one last horrible Nor'wester, and then returning to reclaim her yard from some sneering Other Railway diesel. If Thomas could do all he said, then she could take back her yard, and keep it in order too. She felt that fresh strength in her firebox — even as her fire quailed at such hubris.

She dared to glance around. Toby's expression almost mirrored her own mixed, bemused, expectant feelings. The Caledonians looked ironic. And Oliver pouted.

"What's wrong with life now?" the autotank demanded.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: A Gordon-less main line. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. 🍋 (Conflict-free lemons, at that!)

Thank you for reading! If the next update takes more than a month, then probably come catch me dusting off my as-late underutilized tumblr account and either finally responding to those "character dynamic" asks or else posting some smol things for Traintober.

Speaking of which: **Traintober** approaches!

RedWyvernWrites and Joezworld, two of the freshest and most influential ttte fic writers of the past few years, have each graced the fandom with prompt lists (see respective links). Check 'em out, see which one speaks to your creative soul, and then do one, some, or all (!) the prompts. We're gonna have so much fun!

Chapter 8: Little Engines

Chapter Notes

> Five months. Yeah, that's right, Wolfgang Bloody Amadeus Mozart rose from the damn grave and released new content before M-S-D updated. 💀 Sounds about right.
>
> And now it sounds like Playboi Carti is for-real about to drop. I gotta beat ***that***, right? This is getting too embarrassing...
>
> In all seriousness, apologies for the delay. Shit's been crazy! □ I regret the lost "narrative momentum," and now that things are a tiny bit steadier I look forward to taking us to the end of the line. (Knocking on wood. Hard enough to bruise a knuckle.)
>
> My gratitude to AngrySkarloey for putting me on the song referenced in this chapter. 🇬🇧
>
> Spotlight on @bemudi's ✧ truly gorgeous fanart for Chapter 4 ✧ (thank you!).
>
> Also — shoutout to scrapyard!Duck. Whatta mood. Whatta muse. (How incredibly draw-able. 🦆)

8: Little Engines

The following morning found Emily at Knapford platform 1, well and early. There had been a time — a very recent time — when she did not dare creep into station bounds until boarding began, after which the bustle of staff and passengers offered her a protective force-field against the other engines.

But not that morning. The Stirling Single rolled up as soon as she'd been turned 'round from her morning train, not even stopping for coal and water. She knew the station would be quiet, and that it was the ideal moment…

Her boiler bands felt tight with anticipation as she fixed her eyes on the platform clock, and she twitched now and again to hear the mounting bustle from the street beyond. He was late coming out – for a fair few minutes she feared he'd be kept, and she'd miss her chance –

But in the end, years and years of wary watchfulness paid off. Per his usual habit, the Fat Controller, brow furrowed, came out of his office for air around ten-til, accompanied by a faithful assistant.

He made himself stop and smile at her, despite an obvious air of preoccupation… looking like a man with the cares of the world on his shoulders.

"Are things all right, sir?"

She heard her own unchecked eagerness. Well, why check it! She knew the problem. And she knew the solution. It shone before her like the risen sun, so bright and obvious that if anything she expected Sir Topham to say it before she had a chance to.

"Quite all right, Emily." He did not say it with much conviction — a kind lie. His smile did not quite reach his eyes when he glanced up at the ornate station clock. "The better for seeing you so early. Bless me, *are* you early, or am I late?"

"I could help, sir."

"Help with what?"

She didn't hesitate. "With the Express." Before the Fat Controller's face could rearrange into a stern standoffishness, she dove in. "I know Gordon is in the sheds today, and I just wanted to remind you that I am much better suited to that kind of work than the poor tank engines you had double-heading yesterday. I was *built* for fast trains, sir. And I'm much stronger than the original Stirling Singles that I was modelled from. I could take that train for you myself, and I'm sure – "

"Thank you, Emily. I have already made my arrangements." The Fat Controller spoke firmly, but not harshly, and he softened when he saw disappointment begin to check her (begin to — albeit she was not finished so easily). "The main line is in for an unsettled time, it cannot be avoided, and while I am attending to it I cannot be distracted by any complaints from branch line passengers."

"I don't think you would be, sir!" Emily now forced herself to sound bright. "Thomas could handle my work much more easily than the Express, and he really wants more responsibility. With Toby to guide him, I'm sure he wouldn't let you down."

He was already shaking his head. "Do not make me repeat myself. I have already spoken with Thomas and the other Tidmouth engines this morning, they have their new assignments…"

As if saying the name had revealed him to her sight, Emily just then spotted Thomas, peering intently at them from where he'd been lurking behind the pillar at platform four – and scowling, the rotten little eavesdropper! His all-too-familiar *what's-that-replica-up-to-now* scowl. Emily felt her smokebox burn from the inside out, even as the Fat Controller finished his lecture.

"... you to hold down the fort. I need to know during this time that I can rely on you and Oliver to continue the commuter work that you handle so well."

The Fat Controller and his assistant turned from her then, and Driver put a hand on her regulator – as if she couldn't see for herself that she'd been dismissed. And in front of that long-tongued tank engine, too! What might have been a mere disappointment turned to downright chagrin when she saw Thomas smirk with triumph.

"*Early bird gets the worm*," he hissed at her, sing-song, before puffing back to the yard.

She pouted at the track and road beyond the station, at the gantry signal that seemed to mock her hopes. She'd thought she'd been prepared for a denial, although she was still shocked that the Fat Controller could so easily dismiss a solution that seemed to her perfect. Still, she wouldn't have regretted speaking up — she was quite done regretting that. If only *he* hadn't witnessed it. Of all the hateful little engines!

"And what do you plan to do with a worm?" she demanded pettishly of the air, much put out. "Go fishing?"

*

Oh, things were well and away, after that!

The rest of the week flew by. And what a week it was, altogether. For as horribly as it had begun — and as rapidly as it went — it was still a week like they hadn't had on the North Western in time out of mind.

It was a week where things *happened*. And if the Happenings had at first seemed seismic, they began, after this point, to scale down. To seem more… interesting. Blessedly *small* happenings. Pleasant, even.

Like that first morning. Thomas speaking up for them all, as he had promised Donald, and settling everything with the Fat Controller first thing that morning at the sheds, right under Gordon's haughty and stubborn eye. The rest of them later remarked that the tank engine must have learned something, in all his years of watching others take the lead; he'd done the thing pretty well. And then the Fat Controller visibly pleased, as they had not seen him in ages, between businesslike sobriety and palpable weariness giving them a smile — a real smile. It gave everyone (besides Gordon) who was at the roundhouse that morning a kick of energy like a load of fine-grade coal (and finer grade, mind you, than had been seen on Sodor for many a year).

Certainly that smile fortified Thomas and Rosie against any and all scoffs when they backed onto the Express again that morning. In truth, the busses' and the passengers' surprise at these strange proceedings was already diminishing. So it was without much incident that, an hour after Thomas overhearing the replica's attempt at interference (ha! he had been worried there, for half a minute), the two tank engines were out on the rails, fighting for each mile. Thomas exulted to note that he was already beginning to anticipate his marks, the little twists and turns and tricks of the journey; Rosie gamely endured it.

They had another surprise, when they met the diesel who covering the morning's shunting at Vicarstown. Thomas, who had never seen a diesel, watched the hulking great six-wheeled box with interest, but Rosie's face set with sudden determination. She detached herself from Thomas and marched straight over, cylinders girded. The second surprise was the reaction she got. The big, rumbling machine had proceeded to affably introduce himself as Sidney, to agreeably yield the yard back to her – and then fail, again and again, to remember where he had just put *anything*.

Douglas had arrived right behind them with a goods, and he and

Thomas watched, well entertained, as Rosie's tough front melted by degrees into a weak bemusement. What could she do? Sidney seemed a friendly sort of machine, actually. His confusion was only too genuine. Rosie collapsed into a sort of mild, bemused pity as she gently set him right on a number of points. (Thomas and Douglas, however, felt no obligation to do anything but snigger unhelpfully in the background.)

The diesel soon drifted back across the bridge. After that, for the first couple days, Rosie would double-head with Thomas with his second run out of Vicarstown, and then return with him for the first leg of the evening train. The first and last runs of the day had to be taken by one Scottish twin or another, the evening run requiring them to make a special trip. Soon Rosie could no longer leave Vicarstown even during midday, with the Exchange Yards heavily backed up and the Fat Controller showing no interest in bringing back the leased diesel. Thomas could understand this order, and didn't blame Rosie for her lack of any pushback – but the fact that the ever-busy Scottish twins now had to fill in all four trains annoyed him very much. He couldn't fathom why Neville still wasn't deployed. It was all the more aggravating because the Twins persisted in their newfound mildness. "We maun bring our goods trains oot here anyway," they said, whenever Thomas tried to get them to support a follow-up proposal to the Fat Controller. It would make sense to the tank engine in the moment – but it never stopped him from scowling, whenever he next saw the big new engine idle in the evenings. What would Donald and Douglas know about lazy, pampered big engines! Thomas had some experience with the type.

The Twins only scoffed and said he was cranky because he was tired. Privately, Thomas could admit to himself that maybe there was some truth in that. The Express assignment totaled nearly three hundred miles a day, at a range of speeds, over uneven terrain, with a load of twelve packed coaches. It was a brutal adjustment for a tank engine all too used to daily naps between desultory shunting moves. After the first round trip each day, he had to spend hours raising steam for the next. On the second day he and Douglas slipped on the hill and had to be brought all the way back down after a hard-won two miles to start again. By the third day he needed a tyre replacement and ached in parts that he hadn't even known he'd had.

But he adjusted. He adjusted and, what's more, he did not — *would* not — *could* not complain.

Because, of course, it was not possible that Thomas would roll onto the turntable after each day's work without just enough steam left to affect surprise at seeing Gordon massive and cold in his berth. "Hello there, lazybones!" he'd whistle, as he backed in — clear on the other side of the shed. "Been lounging about here all day, have you? Well, it's all right for some."

And, no matter how swiftly the next stupid morning arrived, no matter how awesomely and amazingly sore he was, when it was time to leave he bit back a groan at the first pressure applied to his cylinders in favour of a grin and a wink at the others, Gordon not least of all. "Still in the sulks, eh Gordon? Sorry, must run — *The Express* must carry on, you know!" And away he'd toot.

If he could not have summoned the strength to do that every morning and night, then the whole lot during the day was hardly worth doing!

As for the long hard slog between those morning and nightly greetings, well, it wasn't so bad. Except it was.

But it wasn't.

But it was.

And yet, it wasn't. There were welcome compensations, anyway. Hard work kept his mind off unknown questions that he didn't really want to think about — like what condition Duck would be in when he was returned to them (he would be, wouldn't he?), or why it was Henry

had left them all without saying goodbye (he didn't think they hated him... did he?) No, even a human, soft and squishy as we are, would generally rather deal with a nice fixable crisis than have to face worries like that. And for the engines, the heavy jobs were almost a complete cure.

Besides, Thomas was endlessly surprised to find how much he *liked* working with the others — with a group of engines he had barely been able to stand the thought of even a week ago. It was exciting, being a team of little engines who could run the whole show themselves. Exciting, each time he backed onto the front of their biggest train. Exciting, to receive the Fat Controller's nods and smiles. Exciting, to encourage Rosie to stretch her wheels… and to feel strangely tolerant whenever she started going off on someone (even when it was him). Thomas had always heard that she was moody or snappy or over-chatty. Somehow, it wasn't what he saw. And learning that his brothers had mentored her lot would have given him perspective if he'd needed it. For the most part, though, he just found her easy to be around.

He was surprised and grateful to the Scottish Twins, too. Oh, they had a bit of an annoying habit of trying to talk or ask him one too many things while they were hard at it ("Just let me puff!" Thomas had yowled back, many times times now, over the rush and pound and wind). But they were quite ready to lend their wheels. He supposed they were bound and determined to help Duck stay. But that didn't mean he might have expected them to be as friendly and as encouraging as they were. Thomas sometimes — earlier on, before he got too dead on his axles to care — felt guilty, creaking away from the Vicarstown platforms and barely making it under his own steam to a water tower. At least once he *didn't*, and Douglas had to push him over, which he did without grumble or grudge. Both twins told him in no uncertain terms to keep still and hold his wheesht when he made any hint about coming to help them, for they generally limped off to do a little shunting and, much sooner than the hours and hours Thomas napped before the afternoon Express, the Caledonian who'd brought the last one in with him had gone off with another train. Thomas was ashamed. He was creating more work for them, after all — and they'd never had much patience for that sort of thing before. But they did now. "It takes all the reserves ae steam ye ha," Donald told him, "for us to get tha' Express off in style. Dinna move a wheel

till the next yin." Their other trains, they told him, were nae sich bad. You could get off an unfitted goods with relatively little effort, and keep building steam even as you went. And they never ran the Express more than twice in a day, let alone the four times Thomas was doing it, day in and day out.

And so Thomas found himself both proud and humbled. Recognised at long last, but compelled to be grateful for everyone's understanding. Pity, he thought once, with an unexpressed scoff, that Gordon after all these years should only feel the first — not the last.

At other times, Thomas had the vague, weary thought that perhaps he should try to have a real chat with Gordon… but whenever he resolved to, another cheeky remark generally flew into his funnel and right out of his mouth before he could think twice. Better to leave it to Oliver! Oliver, who had been another surprise that week — another engine who was proving weirdly tolerable. Thomas soon found, in the evenings, that he returned to a decently tidy yard, Oliver having taken it upon himself to help organise the loose ends that the engines had left during the day. "I want to help!" was all he'd said, and pretty self-importantly at that. That's when Thomas knew that they really were succeeding in their mission — Oliver always wanted on a bandwagon. Now, truth be told, Oliver was no great shakes at sorting a yard — but he was better than nothing, and wheel-weary Thomas appreciated every puff Oliver saved him.

The Twins grumbled to each other that Oliver was really making the special journey to Tidmouth each night to make overtures to Gordon, but they and Thomas alike did agree (with varying degrees of grudgingness) that it was probably good that someone was "working on" the big engine. They couldn't carry on like this forever. Each morning they were more surprised than the last to find that this mad situation continued. Each evening they were more surprised than the last to find that they'd pulled it off.

But they kept pushing on.

And on, and on.

Until Saturday evening found them all at light-bright Knapford, where the Express had come in through the rain-gentle darkness, only fourteen minutes late.

*

At this point, the Express coming in fourteen minutes late was as good as it coming in sixteen minutes early. And it was the start of the true "week's end" as well — the Express didn't run on Sunday. A few of the passengers even lingered for a moment to thank the engines and crew for their efforts that week.

This left rain-splattered Thomas (still wheezing from the run) and the Twins (Donald had been on the train) and Oliver (resplendent under the bright station lights) in great spirits — sharing heartier laughs than had been heard on Sodor's main line in years.

The latter teased the others about their pride in the passengers' compliments, boasting that *he* got that all the time. But the Twins only scoffed, casting up various old peccadilloes to fling against him. Which of course made Thomas shout and giggle.

To his credit, Oliver took no offense to any of it. Instead he began eying the heavy train wistfully. "Wisht I could have a go…"

Thomas scoffed. "Said like an engine that's never done it!"

"Ah, you're champion of the world now, ain't ya? You weren't such a big-talker a week ago!"

"Ye're ower sma'," Donald said, dismissing the idea as absurd, even as Douglas said, "But ye cannae be spared, laddie. What would the branch line do without yer autotrain?"

Oliver was in the middle of an argument that it wasn't an autotrain he ran when it came to the morning and evening fast out of the Big Station, that one was an ordinary train that any of the others could take — when Neville's train came in, safe and slow, on the through line.

The talk and laughter stilled. Neville gave them a strained smile but all he got was an "Evenin'" from the twins and otherwise a collection of stares.

Only minutes later, when the train had passed through, did conversation finally resume.

Specifically, Thomas and Oliver met each other's eye and burst into laughter.

"Awk-waard," sang Oliver.

"Where has he even been all day?" demanded Thomas. His aching parts injected his tattered old complaint with new emphasis.

Douglas only snorted. "Ye're lucky ta see him at all. The lad's up and aboot afore daw."

"I mean," said Oliver, "I can understand if he worked the same day as

us, only started and ended early."

Thomas took it up. "But he only takes the one train really, round trip, doesn't he?"

"A train that gaes to Manchester!" Donald rolled his eyes. "Give me a break. Plenty enou to complain of withoot ye make up a grievance."

"You don't know what big engines are like, Donald!" Thomas argued. He pushed past the way this made the Twins exchange a look and then burst into silent sniggers. "Well… all right, maybe you've met some. But you should know, then! They're not all like Gordon!"

It was Douglas's turn to roll his eyes. "They are, though. It's juist hoo they're built."

"No, I mean, at least engines like Gordon *work*, even if they're divas about it."

"Yeah!" Oliver was quite happy to back Thomas up on this point. "Gordon's amazing, I mean with how reliable he always is. You have to give him credit – "

"But there are other big engines," continued Thomas, with authority, "with the same stuck-up attitude who are no use at *all*. We've had 'em here before, but no Fat Controller's put up with it in anyone except Neville. I *am* surprised that great biscuit-barrel's been allowed to dodge extra jobs this week! Everyone else has pitched in!"

"Oh for heavens' *sake*," said a new voice.

Everyone's eyes shot towards Emily. The well-polished Stirling Single (still dry and spotless) was waiting at the platform with her faithful customised coaches, directly under the station clock. Her gaze was fixed on the sky beyond the station roof… but she took a moment, to roll her eyes.

"Don't talk about things you know nothing of," she snapped — without looking at them.

Thomas flushed pink. He looked at Oliver, did not find mirrored there the indignation that he felt, and sallied forth alone. "How shouldn't I know what I'm talking about? I was here for the first Fat Controller – I was here before *that!* Unlike *some*. I remember very well, how the Hatts deal with shirkers. And all I'm saying is, Neville better take care to make sure he's pulling his weight around here."

Emily made a *tchah* noise (which is, incidentally, a very tricky noise for a steam engine to make).

"Um. Right. Good thing for him, then, that the Flying Kipper is the most profitable train this railway runs."

Thomas wanted very badly to say *come off it.*

But he also knew, deep in his boiler, that Emily would hardly risk speaking up among so many engines she knew despised her only to say nonsense.

"That's the Express," he scoffed.

Her eyes were very intent and steady. She knew he'd pay her out for daring to contradict him. But she did it anyway. "No, it isn't. The Wild Nor'wester is important of course — the whole island would turn on the railway if the service were cut — but Neville's Kipper is more profitable." Suddenly she side-eyed him, her eyes like burning coals. She kept saying *all of you* but Thomas could hardly hear this as anything but *you, you personally, you*. Nor was he meant to. "It's pathetic! All of you kneel to *Gordon* and let him lord over this place and are oh-so-careful to never talk back to him. Because he's so *essential* —"

"Sorry," interrupted Thomas, choking out a laugh. Was she really trying to say that *he* never talked back to *Gordon*? Why, even apart from this very week, Thomas had always snarked at him on the… well, perhaps not on the daily. Not lately. But on the weekly! Monthly, anyhow. And if he didn't bother, it was because it was pointless, because before this very week *everything* had been pointless — not because he had been *cowed!* "You don't mean **me**?"

"If the dome fits," said Emily, each syllable cutting. "But Neville brings in as much revenue as Gordon and then some, under a LOT more danger — you do know he's the only steam engine that is allowed to take freight on the Other Railway these days? He's the *only one*. And I promise you, none of the engines in Manchester are ever confused about whether he's diesel or not! Neville doesn't complain, but the trucks gossip. And our trucks actually respect him" (she appeared not to notice Douglas, brows knitted, throwing off a spark or two as he re-considered her) "because they *know* many of those mainland diesels hate him for being steam and for being North Western, the trucks know that they'd hurt the train if they could. Neville has to be on his guard every second after he crosses that bridge. With all that he brings it back and forth safely every single time, without fuss. Yet none of you will give him the time of day. You ought to be ashamed."

Thomas, stunned and numb, realized that no one else in the crowded station was making any move to speak up. It was as if they, too, intuited that she was really speaking to… *him*. For some reason.

His eyes found Douglas. "Is that — is that *true*?" he demanded, blowing off steam loudly. "About the Kipper? And the diesels?"

Douglas made some sort of hemming noises, his own eyes finding his brother behind Thomas. "Ah hear tell ‘tis the train tha generates the most revenue," he said at last, with a slight emphasis on the verb.

"Aye," said Donald. "But the Fat Controller maun pay the Other Railways to use their rails, and Neville's owners take their share too. That all amounts to big bites ae the profit."

Thomas couldn't say he found it easy to follow this sort of talk. But heat rose in his smokebox. Without being fully aware of it, it was embarrassing to find that the Caledonians and that even *the replica* knew so much more about it than he did. "So… Neville... isn't a Fat Controller's engine?"

"No," said Emily. "Neville is owned by a charitable trust. They preserved him. The North-Western *leases* Neville's services. His trust demands a cut of every train Neville runs, and then they lay all that money aside, in savings. *That's* likely why Sir Topham hasn't had him help you in the evenings. He's expensive."

Thomas's brows were standing on end. "Well," he huffed, "Neville doesn't sound very useful then, after all."

"Don't be stupid," snapped Emily, before either of the Scottish twins (not typically slow to make themselves heard) could cut in. "Even under the terms of his lease, the Flying Kipper is still more profitable under Neville than it ever was under Henry, with his Welsh coal. And Neville's owners have every right to set their terms."

"The terms seem pretty high!" scowled Thomas. "*We're* trying to keep

rail service running for a whole island full of people. Why should we hand a cut of each train over to Neville's owners just so they can hoard them like dragon treasure, hey?"

Emily looked crosser and crosser. "*Well*," she began, "perhaps the lease *might* be different if they trusted us. They save all that money — "

"La-ssie…" hissed Donald.

She ignored this warning completely. " — so that *their* engine doesn't wind up like Edward. If Neville gets hurt, they've already set aside funds for his repair."

One or the other of the twins gave a light groan. Rain streamed from the station roof, now very noisy in the sudden silence.

Thomas hissed something through gritted teeth.

The Stirling Single was not one whit intimidated. "What's that?"

"*Get. out.*" Thomas's face was set in steel.

"I'll go when I'm cleared," said Emily, airy.

"You're not wanted here."

"Never have been. I know."

"C'mon, lad," Douglas tried to intervene. But it availed nothing.

"*I* know you can't go one day without eying up some other engine's job," snarled Thomas. "I heard you the other morning, didn't I? Wheedling the Fat Controller to let you have the Express!"

There was another stunned silence from the engines around them. "Nae sich a bad idea," observed Donald to Oliver… but in an undertone.

"No," whispered Oliver, hollow and wide-eyed. "Never…!"

Emily felt all the stares on her and for the first time started to blush, but she set her teeth defiantly. "And what of it?"

"Wasn't enough for you to take over Edward's job. Now you want Gordon's too!"

"For everyone's information," she said, stiffly, "I also suggested that Thomas be promoted to the branch."

"I don't want anything to do with your *schemes!*" Thomas all but exploded. "The rest of us have real problems to tackle. Like real engines! We've been carrying this railway since before your first stupid photoshoot for your first stupid railway magazine! We're figuring out how to trade our *LIVES* for each other because it's the only option we have left!"

"*Hush.*" Emily clanged for emphasis. "This is **not** how you behave in

front of passengers. You silly little engine."

Her eyes darted back and forth, and Thomas realised in an onrushing wave of horror that people lingering on the platforms were staring… and that he had been shouting loudly enough to be heard a long ways 'round.

There was perfect silence from engines and stock until Emily's train departed. Thomas groaned with sheer relief when he was cleared to remove their own coaches to the yard.

"I've done it now," he fretted, "I've really done it. I'm an idiot, someone's bound to tell the Fat Controller. She just made me so angry! God… he's going to flatten my funnel, isn't he?"

There was a bit longer of a pause than Thomas should have liked before anyone assured him otherwise.

Finally, when he had already chuffed into the lonely dark and wet beyond station bounds, he heard behind him a calm, "Dinnae fash yerself. Takes more than tha, fuirr him to discipline an express engine."

"Just leave her alone," Oliver agreed, eagerly. "It's likely to blow over soon."

*

It was the second-longest night Thomas had that week. Quite a rough, restless one. He forgot to toss off his usual gloat to Gordon as he backed in from the turntable to clear across the other side of the shed.

Clear on the other side of the shed, where he could hide his weariness in the thick of the shadows, as well as hide his face blushing whenever he remembered again what he'd done at the station, and felt so sick with regret and self-reproach that he nearly vomited ash.

An anxious, dark, lonely night. Keen though he was to hide his misery from Gordon, it almost would have been better to have complained to him and been snubbed soundly for it than this endless silence. Tidmouth sheds remained empty, save for the two of them. Oliver had gone back to spend the night on the Little Caledonian branch. (Thomas pouted, when he realised. After hanging off his coupling link half the week, Oliver might have had the decency to say good night.) Douglas would be with Oliver, Donald would still be in steam for a midnight goods. Thomas regretted not having at least tried to persuade his crew to let him sleep over with Toby that night – or at least he regretted it until he imagined the level, amused, *you're-an-idiot* look with which the tram engine would have undoubtedly heard out Thomas's heartfelt rant. With the shed so deserted and silent, the emptiness of Edward's old berth was eloquent and Thomas felt something intangible inside him break all over again. But Edward was gone and pretty much the last advice he'd ever given him was to think about trying to make peace with Emily. Thomas writhed at the remembrance. Actually, if he'd been able to make an impossible wish just then, he'd probably want Henry there to pour out his heart to. You'd never have caught old Henry saying something like that!

It was all the worse because there was no Express on Sunday. Tomorrow was his day off — most of the engines' day off, indeed. Two hours ago Thomas had been very keen on the prolonged rest, and now here he was alone and achey in the dark, unable to sleep... sick with worry and longing for a distraction…

The heavy sleepless silence between him on one end of the roundhouse, and Gordon on the other, spun out and out, all the night long.

*

He slept in till ten the next morning.

Beyond the open shed doors, the yard was dull and dead.

Ten-thirty.

Had anyone told the Fat Controller yet?

You blew it. Like always.

Ten-forty.

You had one last chance... and you blew it...

Eleven.

You could hear the second hand ticking on the clock in the shed. Thomas had never heard the sound before.

Eleven-thirty.

"Hiiiiiiiiiii, Gordonnn…"

No reply.

Quarter till. *Tick-tock. Tick.*

Noon.

Tock.

Twelve-fifteen.

"You don't have to worry about me taking your train this week." Very dully. "Fat Controller's probably putting the replica on it…"

Twelve-thirty.

"You're not even a *little* curious?"

Quarter til.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

One.

"Bust my buffers, this is ***dull***!"

One-fifteen. Road too far off to distinguish any vehicles.

One-twenty.

Half past one.

Quarter til...

An engine could go mad, like this.

Two.

"Are you ever going to talk again?" (Quite conversationally.)

Two-oh-seven…

"To anyone?"

Two-ten.

"Ever?"

Two-twenty-five.

"Ugh, my *dome* aches! I didn't even know that was possible..."

Two-thirty.

Two-thirty-five.

Two-forty.

Two-forty-two.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Three. Still broad daylight.

Three-ten.

Quarter-past... ohhhhhh, chuff it.

"*FIFTY GREEN BOTTLES, SITTING ON THE WALLLL…*

FIFTY GREEN BOTTLES SITTING ON THE WALLLL... !"

*

Gordon did not budge.

At thirteen bottles, Thomas finally gave it up.

Chapter 9: Big Things

Chapter Notes

> Enormous thanks to Zeroeth Dog, AngrySkarloey, JZ1, and Houseboat_Island for their excellent feedback on this chapter. And a second, special shout-out to Joe, as he supplied what is probably the biggest laugh in this thing.
>
> Made a small playlist for this chapter, just some of the songs on my big SW writing playlist that encapsulate, in order, this chapter's emotional arc; you might opt have it in the background to enhance this reading experience. (And if it really *does* enhance your experience, let me know and I'll add them for all the chapters.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9: Big Things

Monday, Monday

Someone did indeed report the engines' fuss to the Fat Controller. By the tired look on his face Monday morning when he frowned at Thomas from the top of platform 1, it was probably quite a few someones.

"Thomas, I am very disappointed in you."

The tank engine squirmed. He'd spent every hour yesterday convincing himself that he just wanted to face the music and get it over with, it couldn't be worse than the waiting.

He'd been wrong.

"After the way you rallied everyone together last week… there seemed to be a real sense of teamwork and unity taking root, and I cannot *fathom* what possessed you to throw it away in favour of pitching an embarrassing fit in front of half the town."

"I'm really, really sorry, sir." He heard the desperation in his own voice and he tried to steady himself. There was no point trying to explain the rage and despair that was always simmering in him when he laid eyes on Emily. It was almost the twin of the despair he felt whenever he laid eyes on the Fat Controller, ever since he'd brought her here... But engines far more well-spoken than Thomas had tried to explain to the Fat Controller how they all felt, and failed, and in at least one or two cases been chucked back to a changing, unsafe mainland for their trouble. Thomas was not fool enough to try. "I mean really sorry. I lost my temper and I don't have any excuse. I hope you'll give me another chance."

"I haven't many other options, I hardly have the coverage to send you to the shed for a day." The Fat Controller sounded harried. "I knew that Emily had a hard time settling in, but I really believed you lot were past all that unpleasantness…" He sighed, and mopped his brow. Thomas, well familiar with the cadence of a Hatt reprimand, knew that he was on the verge of telling Thomas that he needed to apologise to the wronged party. But then the man seemed to remember that he was drowning in the consequences from the last time he'd ordered an engine to do such a thing and so he changed tack at the last second. "This ends now. You are not to quarrel with Emily again, Thomas."

A sigh of relief. Apologising would have been *murder* — this he could do. "I won't, sir."

"I hope not. You are many years her senior, and ought to set a better example. As for your disgraceful outburst in front of the passengers…"

Thomas braced himself.

"... well, I will be using you to help pull every last express service until Gordon has made amends for *his* behaviour. He has not your ready willingness to own up so this will likely be a good many trains yet." The Fat Controller saw the relief on Thomas's face and smiled grimly. He looked unsettlingly old in that moment — for a moment the tank engine was looking at his controller's father, towards the end of his own career, and there was an audible pang somewhere in Thomas's motion. "I expect you will find it punishment enough, by the end of the thing."

"I really want to be useful to you, sir," said Thomas seriously. "I'm happy to help. And I am going to try my best to get along with the others, I promise you."

"I would settle for just Emily."

Thomas winced at this flat dismissal once he was out of the Fat Controller's line of sight. He had made that promise very sincerely, with all his heart, only to be asked for something that he wasn't sure he could deliver. For a few minutes he was very gloomy…

He had spent virtually all his life on Sodor, could just barely remember arriving full of nerves and eagerness. But his own railway, a big and bustling outfit, seemed to have vaguely forgotten him by the time the fighting was over — and this one had never seemed to quite know what to do with him. Shunting engines they'd always had and he'd never been able to establish himself on trains. He'd been a very young engine to make his home far away from his builders and all the rest of his classmates. Now he was an old and obsolete engine and he had nothing much to show for it. His current driver had reminded him a couple of times that he was lucky to have been spared the end of steam when his classmates had all gone to torch, but it had only made

his engine especially dull. He didn't feel lucky. He envied them, really — not their end, of course. But at least they had lived before they died. Their work was obscure and unglamorous but they'd been useful shunters for a very long time, usually working alongside each other. Lonely and bored, Thomas had put in no small amount of time during those years imagining the fun they were probably having together without him. He'd rather have been with them all those years and gone to scrap with them than be separated from them forever on this faraway island where he had very few friends and where his managers took no more pride in him than the big railway had taken in the other E2s. Edward had always been very good to him but he couldn't replace Thomas's whole family or supply all that he longed for in a friend — and anyway, Edward was gone. Thomas and Toby got on pretty well — but Toby regarded him as a silly, sheltered engine (the worst of it was when Thomas suspected he was right). The Fat Controllers he'd worked for had always dealt with him fairly… when they remembered he existed, which didn't often seem the case. Especially since Toby and Duck had arrived, and, it seemed to Thomas, showed they could do everything he could do easily and loads more besides. Altogether, Sodor had always felt more or less like exile, and when Thomas let himself take stock of his position and his years — well, he didn't often let himself, because it was like looking down a pitch-black gorge where a solid bridge ought to be. It was such a *waste* of a life.

He just wished he had ever been really essential, to anyone. But he'd always seemed surplus to everyone's requirements and over the years he'd finally, gradually slipped into more and more of a sarcasm-encrusted resignation. It seemed to make him less of a nuisance to everyone than the emotional little engine who was forever making his bid… and, in consequence, forever slamming smokebox-first into the buffers…

For a few moments this cloud hung heavy over him.

"Right," his driver rapped the side of his cab. "Enough lagging about."

Then Thomas, shaking his rods, responded with a sharp whistle, and

compelled himself to look on the bright side. He'd been sick with the anticipation of the Fat Controller taking him off the Express and giving it to Emily. Somehow he'd avoided this most obvious punishment and the relief of it made his smile quickly re-inflate.

He was still taking trains!

*

The brightly-painted busses on the neighbouring street, who had seemed to be losing interest as the weekend had neared, all honked and laughed energetically that Monday morning, when they passed and saw the Wild Nor'wester waiting at the station with Thomas, and no Gordon in sight. Loud bets were made on when the little tank engine would tap out. Thomas scowled, smokebox burning, to hear the best odds were laid on Wednesday between 6 and 8 pm.

He had to take the insults alone. The only engine in sight was… Neville, for some reason? He was at the bad water tower where Emily had used to decamp, before she had taken up sticking her funnel into things, and from so far away he hardly helped contribute to a show of North Western strength. Thomas began to feel seriously alarmed at the notion that Neville was to be his second engine when Douglas arrived in the nick of time. He wheezed into Knapford looking glum, his fireman immediately pounding on something within his cab with a hammer. It transpired that his firebox door was giving trouble.

"Are you all right for this?"

"Aye," said Douglas, sounding tired. "If only ye culdnae pitch and toss so. It's barely hauding oon."

His words were almost drowned by very slow, very deep chuffs

coming up behind him. "I could help?"

"You?" Thomas stared. He and Neville had never been face-to-face before. "What are you even doing here, aren't you usually on the mainland by now?"

"Erm… yes, I'm usually… work stoppage at the docks…" Neville coughed. "I have the day free, so if you'd like, I could — ?"

The great hulking engine's smile was almost comically timid and tiny.

But the sudden panic that seized Thomas was not funny at all. "NO!" he shouted, hurrying to take advantage of the newly-set points and to claim his spot in front of Douglas. "No, no, there's no need to trouble *you*." Despite his haste, he was not entirely blind to the way Neville's face had frozen and was now starting, ever so slowly, to fall. The bigger engine began to slowly chuff backwards in retreat and Thomas cursed himself. Right after he'd promised to get along with the others, too! "Sorry, Neville, nothing personal!" he shouted after him, a little desperately, as the distance between the two of them increased. "It's just that you're expensive!"

There was a confused-sounding whistle of reply as Neville slunk back to the far siding.

Behind Thomas, Douglas wheezed. "Aye, good catch that," he assured the tank engine. "Verra smooth."

"Oh shut up…"

Thomas vaguely made a note to try and follow up with the leased

engine that evening.

But that was four heavy lifts away. Each hour in between proved to be *so long*.

Tuesday's Grey and Wednesday Too

He missed Neville that evening — he never had really understood Neville's evening schedule — but the next day felt much the same, so far as the difficulty of each hour.

The Fat Controller's grim prediction about how the assignment might begin to appear to Thomas seemed to come to rapid realisation, that week. Everything was catawampus (a descriptor that a much-dispirited Thomas deployed by Tuesday afternoon to describe the ordeal — and which made his young fireman repeat the word, and then bust up cackling, no fewer than five times before their shift ended).

As wheel-sore and dome-heavy as he was, it might have been bearable, if everyone was acting like they had last week.

Yet, even though the Fat Controller had stopped short of plunging Thomas into disgrace, the other engines did not resume their previous treatment of him. Douglas had, briefly — but it didn't seem to last.

*

"Really fancies himself, that one, doesn't he?" Thomas scoffed that night, not ill-naturedly, as Oliver, headlamps swaying, chuffed away on the fast line out of the Big Station with his branch line train. With his large wheels and smart whistle, the Western tank engine stepped like he and his train were setting out somewhere much grander than staid, sleepy Suddery.

"Mm," clanked Douglas. "Naw, he's all richt, Ollie."

Thomas didn't think much of Douglas's lapse of conspiratorial humour — yet. He never was one to think, and much less when his rods ached from the fourth and last of the day's fast runs. Anyway, Douglas was always a bit protective of Oliver. It was Donald who was usually readier to have a laugh at the Westerner's expense — albeit Thomas was not fool enough to believe that Donald wasn't proud to have helped Oliver's escape to Sodor, and wouldn't do it again.

*

"Wee autotank's getting his rest a nicht," Donald snorted early next morning, exhaling smoke from his nostrils, "as he shuild."

Thomas blinked around the sleep in his eyes even as Donald swiftly, without allowing time for the points to be set for Thomas, raced forward to shunt his own line of coal hoppers into place. "All right, all right," he said cautiously, after the echoes of the ringing clangs had faded, "I know it's not his job. It's not yours either, I don't mind doing it. I only meant I don't know why I've seen so little of Oliver here since Friday. He can rest just as well at Tidmouth," he added, with a sudden grin (despite his own exhaustion). "I conk out now about as soon as I hit the buffers, and Gordon won't keep him up. Do you know, he still hasn't said one word."

"Aye, 'tis a nice change," Donald allowed — a little less defensive than before.

A little.

*

He felt the chill again Wednesday evening, when Neville chuffed by Vicarstown yards while Thomas was taking on coal. Thomas whistled, startling his own crew and, indeed, rather annoying them. Meanwhile for his trouble Neville did not respond at all, only kept building speed as he went back over the bridge to the mainland.

Thomas felt very small — and with a growing, unsettling sense that he was becoming invisible to the world around him.

*

(Was this normal behaviour for the new engine? Well, Thomas couldn't have told you, because *Thomas had never whistled to him before.*

But he still felt hard done by.)

*

Throw Me Tomorrow

The worst of all came the next morning, and it was instigated in a most unexpected way.

When they got back to Knapford, Douglas's firebox door was already knocked completely off. As atonement for being the rattler who kept causing the thing (apparently!), Thomas used the last of his puff to tug the other engine over to the fitter's yard, where the workers would see about providing Douglas's crew with a quick but somewhat sturdier solution.

Unfortunately, the North Western's fitters' yard was separated by nothing but a weed-infested chain-link fence from Velocity Transport Ltd.'s garage. The engines generally hated having to make a visit for this very reason — if you were stuck there for more than twenty minutes you'd start attracting busses like they were flies, and you were a discarded fizzy drink in summer.

This time, it only took about ten to draw a whole leering, grinding, rumbling pack.

"Which one is it?" "Boffa dem, is my guess." "Nah — nah — it's the long 'tender' one what's got a boo-boo!" (A roar of laughter.) "Aww, it's not the blue puffball?" "Yah sure?" "Budge over, I can't see!"

Thomas glanced wearily at Douglas, but then did a double-take. The Scottish engine seemed to consider that this was the perfect opportunity for a nap, and that no amount of bus racket was going to prevent him taking it.

"What's wrong wi' him?" "Dunno — looks same as always." "You mean stupid." (More laughter.) "Oy — oy — yah, you! What's wrong wi' yeh?"

Thomas supposed that ignoring the hecklers might be the *sensible* thing to do. But it was wildly out of character for Douglas, and the tank engine stared, feeling as though the rails had fallen away beneath him. Either Douglas had sustained some far severer damage than he'd let on, or...

Or...?

"What's wrong wi' him? You mean, apart from his face?" "Ahahahaha!" "Yah, lucky us, we have the ugly twin over 'ere!'"

Well, if Douglas wasn't going to put on for the North Western, fine! Someone had to.

Thomas hit back with a long, loud whistle. "YOU lot are ones to talk! If *I* had your faces, I'd — "

At least half of them honked rapidly, drowning him out.

"Aww, de widdle yard gopher has sumfink to sayyy!" "Ay, that's a good one." "What *is* that thing?" "The railway's new express engine, isn'ee?" "Hey — hey, shunter! Howzit you still in one piece?"

Thomas watched with real disgust as they all rumbled and sawed their wheelbases in collective hilarity. It was as if a bunch of coal trucks had been given their own internal combustion engines. A disgrace, in other words. Busses didn't seem to have any sense of shame. They were all painted in a garish multicolored racing-striped nightmare, emblazoned on each side with a silver star. Only a few years ago some American corporation had bought up all of the old local bus companies on the south of the island. Frankly the infusion of cash had

been great for the busses but Thomas, for his part, felt they had paid too high a price. If someone tried to paint *him* like that he'd probably ask if he could just go join Edward and Henry. The island as a whole loathed the stupid tacky name and bemoaned their flashy advertisements and were deeply suspicious that Velocity would cut local routes. Still, the new busses were big and clean and numerous, and fares were cheap. Passengers like that sort of thing. Bus patronage had shot up dramatically since "the takeover."

"Disappointed much?" Thomas taunted. "Did you all lose your bets? I know most of you said I wouldn't finish yesterday's trains."

But they were taunting him right back, and there were more of them.

"What happened to your Big Wheel?" sneered the nearest and the loudest of the double-deckers. The other busses growled and hooted approval. "He's finally put out to pasture, then?"

"Ha. You wish!"

"Don't lie to us, teapot. We know he hasn't been seen in a fortnight!"

"It's only been a week!" Thomas blasted his whistle.

"They can't get him to run again, can they?"

"You WISH," the tank engine repeated, and there was such genuine disdain in his scoff that some of his tormentors felt the truth of it.

"Nah, he ain't broken, the ol' tin-pot," said another double-decker, whose upper-floor curtains were all drawn. "Being punished, I heard."

"He's having MAINTENANCE," insisted Thomas, furious beyond belief.

"It's the wrong season for that," harrumphed Closed-Curtains, "he only goes to your big shop January or February — "

"Well this year he's going now!"

"Never has in all my time," Closed-Curtains scoffed. "Since 1970. During the season he's only ever missed thirty-three trains."

"Yah!" agreed the loudest double-decker, grille leering. "And we know his boiler ticket's good two years yet!"

"What, you're all tracking him like that?" Thomas, and even Douglas from the look of him, were taken aback. Then fresh steam curled in Thomas's cylinders, fueled by pure pride. "Well, of course you are," Thomas raced headlong, with relish, "he's worth literally two dozen of you sad little *puttering golf carts*."

They *had* to watch Gordon so carefully, didn't they? The bus companies, both pre- and post-takeover, had eaten away at their branch line passengers and even at their Locals. But they had never been able to compete with the tightly-timed Wild Nor'wester service, never. Thomas was fiercely glad to hear that they stared on so enviously at Gordon. Like great useless fish plastering their faces against the bowl.

He hoped they were eating their hearts out.

"He's been out of action too long," Closed-Curtains insisted, the rumble of his engine dark and ominous. "We know summat's wrong — "

"Yeah, well, *this* time he's getting his *steam chest re-thermomatysed*," Thomas spat.

Silence.

"... His steam chest what."

"*Re-thermomatysed*. And... and something about his valves too. It's a *massive improvement* to his running, they brought in engineers from the *mainland*. When he comes back he's going to break all his old records. Watch and see!"

For a moment their engines all idled in mutterings among themselves.

Then one bus after another shifted gears, and began to putter away.

"Better hurry it up!" jeered Loud-Grille... the most reluctant to give up the fight. "Or we'll have everyone on our *own* nonstop service!"

"You don't HAVE a nonstop service!" Thomas yowled after his retreating exhaust-pipe. But they might institute one, he thought. Maybe he wasn't Miss Know-It-All Emily, but he knew the basics of their biggest rivalry, anyway.

It hadn't occurred to him before, but now that he'd heard the idea he knew that, from Velocity's point of view, this was a very good moment for them to seize.

"Dinna fash yerself," mumbled Douglas... yawning widely, and slowly shedding his pretense of sleep. "They canna put on new routes so easily. They're aye owerextended."

Thomas only half-glared, half-pouted.

"You *were* awake." (He ignored Douglas saying that he cuildnae hardly expect to sleep through that racket.) "But you never let anyone talk to you like that! So... you were... you were, what, testing me? Just waiting to — to see what I'd do?"

Thomas was utterly baffled, and no less so when Douglas only surveyed him with one grim, level eye before sinking back to his nap.

"Canna an engine wonder?" the Caledonian asked, eyes closed. "Everyone hae been full ae surprises, lately."

Freaky Friday

Donald began to take over afternoons, perhaps to give his brother's shaky firebox door a reprieve. But he was no more animated than Douglas. He was affable, practical, even-tempered — and reserved. It

began to drive Thomas a little batty. He very much missed the easy camaraderie from the work together the previous week, and it was *aggravating* to have no idea what had changed. Douglas's quiet might have been chalked up to a brown study… at times Oliver's remark suggesting Thomas was wide the mark if he thought Douglas any less of a worrier than Edward and Henry came back to the tank engine. Well, Oliver worked the same branch line as the twins, he would know. Thomas began to accept that when Douglas was silent he was usually fretting about something, even if he did do so with a semi-murderous expression that projected anything but worry.

Donald, however, was not silent. He made perfunctory small talk with Thomas during their breaks, he was no less cooperative than the week before.

But he began to feel a *stranger*. He twitted and ribbed the other engines — he didn't rib Thomas. He seemed to be honouring the tank engine's preference to not shout conversation at each other while chuffing along tough uphill stretches — somehow Thomas didn't feel the relief. Anyway, out of the corners of Donald's carefully neutral eyes, somehow Thomas began to see Douglas's grim, minute scrutiny after the busses had left them in peace in the fitter's yard.

He no longer felt invisible, but under surveillance.

But it was only once a puffed-up Oliver had tooted on by with some absurd boast — and Donald *didn't* take the opportunity to share a scoff or grumble — that Thomas began to pinpoint the problem. Who was the only engine around whom Donald had ever even begun to hold his tongue?

"Why are you treating me like an explosives truck?" Thomas demanded in a hiss, at the next water column opportunity. "Worse, why are you treating me like I'm *Gordon*?"

*

Donald didn't exactly own up to it.

"Dinnae fash yerself, Ahm nae mistaking ye for an engine who kin pull a soaked brakevan aff a greased siding," he groused, before sighing a cloud of relieved steam as water began to gush into his tank. Relieved steam — but not content. Oh, it was a mizzling afternoon, causing a constant mist of wreathed steam off hot smokeboxes and hot boilers. The sort of damp, irritating conditions where engines without shelter have little wish to chat — sensible engines, that is. But Thomas, for all his hard running the past week, was still Thomas: now that the idea was burning within his smokebox he had to have it out. Donald seemed resigned. "Ah ainly hope Gordon and Controller patch it up before we're baith ae us a pile ae scrap iron."

"Okay, *none* of that is a denial!" Thomas scowled accusation. "You don't beat around the bush with any engine — except sometimes Gordon. I never *did* understand it," he added, rushing forward without pausing for breath, or for a chance of pressing Donald on the point, "it's not that I think you're *scared* of him. And it's definitely not that you like him."

"Definitely nae."

"I mean, you'd be crazy to, when he had Duck sent away."

"Enow ae that." Donald rolled his eyes. "Yon wee tram already reamed me oot fuir that once this month, ma paint is still blistered."

"Wait." Surely he couldn't have heard that right. "*Toby*?"

"Aye. I dinnae need to be dragged by ye, too."

Thomas raised his pointed eyebrows. Toby *was* tough for so small an engine — and he could be sly. But the notion that he could, literally or figuratively, "drag" any 3F engine anywhere — much less drag fiery Donald, and live to tell the tale — strained credulity. "If you say so. But he's sort of... right. Are you, like, *well?* Or are you just — angry with me?"

It couldn't be the latter, it couldn't — neither of the Caledonians ever hesitated to tell you right off, when they had a grievance — and yet it was the second one Donald sighed heavily at, and not the first.

"Fine. Gordon ne'er liked Duck. Even afore Duck played Good Samaritan. From the start Gordon never liked him, and in the end he was always going to have the wee engine sent awa." The Caledonian eyed him deliberately. "Ye never liked Emily. Now wuird has it she may be in some trouble."

"Trouble?!"

"Aye."

Thomas burned with indignation under the weight of Donald's significant stare. "Well, that wouldn't be because of *me*."

"It wuildnae?" Donald knit his eyebrows. "Ye flipped yer ashpan Saturday evenin'. Aired our business in front ae God and everyone. Ye got away wi it withoot so much as a scolding-atop-an-oil-barrel-in-the-yard, and now it sounds Fat Controller's assistant is asking questions aboot *her*."

"I didn't speak ill of her to the Fat Controller! I *couldn't*. He *was* cross with me."

"Ye're sure?" Donald appeared to be x-raying him for mistruths.

"*Yes*, I'm sure. If she's in trouble at all it's not on my account. Must be something to do with her branch line."

Perhaps the bitterness he laid on those last couple words undermined his plea of innocence. Donald looked sceptical.

"I bet it's not even true," insisted Thomas, "but even if it is, do you really care so much about it? I know you were playing nice with her for a bit there. I don't understand why. But even *so* … don't you have *bigger* things to worry about? Like this express thing, or how Duck's doing, or — "

"I dinna know her well," Donald agreed roughly. "But maybe I shuild. Aye, me and Douggie dropped the feud. After the Red Engine. He talked ae her as if she were to be pitied aye as much as Duck or Edward. I reckon he was richt, he was richt aboot all the rest ae it."

Thomas gave a scoff, out of reflex. "Red Engine. He seemed a right pillock, that one."

Donald shot him a look of *takes one to know one*.

(Thomas shoved down some stray thoughts deep into the recesses of his smokebox. Like how Toad mightn't have rescued Edward… but he *had* brought back Duck. In much the same way as he'd accompanied Oliver through the valley of the shadow of death. Or… the flashing of

a shrill *She used to worship the rails you ran on!* juxtaposed uncomfortably with mounting memories from the past week of Rosie lighting up to see him when he came into Vicarstown, and her tagging after him eagerly as he breathlessly took on first water then coal, chatting at him all the while… No. No, this was all stupid. Oracles don't have Scouse accents. Thomas was pretty sure of that.)

"Ye're trying to change the subject," said Donald. "Ye hate her, and ye want the rest ae us to feel the same."

"I don't. I mean, *sort* of, but — but I promised the Fat Controller I wouldn't fuss with her any longer. I meant it."

"Ye meant it."

"Yeah, I did!"

"So ye dinnae want her sent awa?"

"What – what kind of question is that?! You're crazy."

" 'Okay, *none* of that is a denial'," retorted Donald... in an eeriely perfect English accent that rendered the tank engine speechless.

For all of two seconds.

"W-W-W-Well, *first* of all, that was a *terrible* impression, I do not sound like that — "

"It was an impression to win me a trophy and a sash, laddie; noo give me an answer. Ye dinnae want her sent away?"

Thomas had a distinct pain in his boiler. The burning fury of hatred, and of a hatred that he couldn't let go of now, he couldn't, his world was topsy-turvy and he had so little to hold on to just then. He screwed up his face. "No-o-o-o… I guess not. I used to. But it doesn't matter anymore. I don't like her…" (... *and I like to watch her suffer*…) "... but no, I… I guess I wouldn't feel much either way, if she got the sack."

He only knew the truth of it as he said it, and it felt like freefall.

"Guid, then."

Thomas found he couldn't bear Donald's very intent, serious consideration. He flared, scrambling for solid ground.

"But what's it *matter*, anyhow? You talk like I *could* have her sent away, if I wanted! Fat Controller needs her way more than he needs me."

"Nae richt noo."

"Yeah, well," (Thomas had to fight a bit of a self-satisfied grin), "that's temporary, though..."

Donald blew off steam in an emphatic negatory. "Gordon will return. But he'll nae be the Big Yin agin. Looks to everyone like it'll be ye.

And we cannae help but wonder what that will mean, fuirr the rest ae us."

Thomas made a great effort to try to parse this on his own. This time, for a full three seconds.

"... *WHAT?* "

"Dinnae shout." Donald pulled a face.

"Don't talk rubbish, then. You're really saying I'm Gordon?"

"Nae, if ye were Gordon, I'd be on ma own branch line richt noo, and hae a hunnerd fewer aches." Donald groaned this as a prayer. "I'm sayin' ye're the yin who's in wi Fat Controller noo."

"In?"

"Aye."

"With the Fat Controller?"

"Laddie, let's speed this along."

"All right..." Thomas felt like his lower mouth was on a hinge as busted as the one that was supposed to be pinning Douglas's firebox door. "Uh. So that's — that's why you hate me now."

"Nae!" Donald's weary eyes flew wide open again, full of fire. "Nae in the least. There's nae guid in hating a Big Yin anyway, they're Useful. A nuisance muir often than nae — but Useful."

"What — what IS a Big Yin, though? You know we all thought you two called Gordon that 'cos he's, well. Cos he's big."

"That disnae hurt," Donald allowed. "But it's nae any engine that can be the Yin. Bah," he scowled, with a flare of impatience at Thomas's vacant expression, "dinnae be stupid, laddie. It's what the busses call the Big Wheel, inn'it? The yin who holds down the fleet when the storm comes!"

Thomas was quiet, images of some of the "ragers" that every couple of decades would try to batter Tidmouth back into the sea come to living memory all around him. The spray of storm-whipped ocean, the incredible overpowering roar of angry wind.

It took a while for him to see that Donald surely wasn't talking about actual storms. "You mean any threat. Don't you?"

"Management," said Donald flatly.

"Oh, not this again!" Thomas rolled his eyes, growing heated again. "You're way too suspicious of the Fat Controller, Donald!"

"Aye? He wuildna ever chuck ye away. But he could ha sent ma brother awa — "

"But he *didn't* — "

"And he DID sack Duck."

That was a blow, but Thomas refused to look at it. "He's a really, really good controller. And I'm not saying it because I'm naive, I *know* there are bad managers…"

He hadn't known them so very long… but he hadn't forgotten his earliest years of service. Donald could nitpick all he liked, what did he know! He'd not known the island in those years of confusion and hard usage. When those of them on the rails had scarcely ever been spoken to, except to be yelled at or cursed out, not even indeed when they deserved to be blamed – you could get away with quite a lot in those days, in fact – but for inconveniences or troubles that the engines had not caused and could not prevent. If it hadn't been for Thomas's first crew he doubted he should have learned English at all, and if it hadn't been for the first Fat Controller he would certainly not have known what it was like to live on an orderly, predictable, well-managed railway. To be held accountable for his actual faults and to be generally encouraged had been a revelation as if dropped from the heavens. He knew – he knew with a sick bitterness – that a lot had weakened and frayed since those long-ago golden days, and yet he was still certain that Donald was very ungrateful.

"Din ah ken it," said Donald, echoing Thomas's own thoughts. "Din ah ken he's good? But a good man cannae see all things. And, e'en if he did, lad – e'en if he did – he is still flesh and not metal. Nae human will aye be on oor side. They dinna aye see their own interest – and if they cannae see their own, they cannae see ours. Our last help is aye in each other."

"Like you," said Thomas, voice dry. "When Douglas was at the end of the line..."

"Aye. Sir Topham has ma respect, laddie, but he is Management and in the end Management is the threat an engine cannae escape. Unless the engine is for ye, who can couple us together snug and tight, and bring us safely past an evil eye."

The tank engine's tired mind biffed it around a bit more. "But the Big Yin is just the favourite, isn't it? I don't know why you'd trust Controller's favourite more than Controller himself."

"Nor din I. They're nae the same. Yon wee tram is the favourite" (Donald sounded rather contemptuous, before he was compelled to speak more loudly, over Thomas's own scoff). "But Toby willnae be a force that a Controller maun *reckon* with."

"Yeah," agreed Thomas, "cos Toby's not a dense-domed, big-wheeled ars—"

"He's sma', he's settled, and he keeps to himself," Donald corrected.

"Maybe we're saying the same thing."

Donald's lips twitched in a tired approximation of his usual grin. "Maybe so."

But Thomas kept frowning over the matter.

"Edward," he said at last. "For a long time. It was Edward who could organise us."

"Ehh."

"Ingrate," Thomas accused, with all the indignation his spent boiler could muster (it wasn't much). "He spoke to the Fat Controller about *you* two, when you thought you'd be sent away."

"I ken it." Donald's voice was quiet and rough. "But the Big Yin isnae chucked to the back of the shed to rust, and forgotten."

"Well... that's basically what he's done to Gordon, now."

"I ken it," repeated Donald. "And he'll be let out again, sooner or later... but the Fat Controller will never let him have tha same pull again. That's the point ae all this pother we're in. Ah'm nae sorry ae it, it's fuirr the best – "

"Why *would* you be sorry for it? You act like we need some sort of engine leader. I dunno, I think – maybe – maybe we all need to lead together. As a group."

Donald snorted. "Hoo's that to wuirrk? There are engines here that dinna e'en *whistle* to each ain. Anyway, in a group every engine aye looks to another to speak up, and naucht is ever done. Nae, we need the next Yin to be as muckle a fighter as Gordon." He eyed Thomas with scepticism. "Someone who isnae afeared to tell Controller the truth ae the matter."

The tank engine felt his smokebox heating sharply, from the inside out. And this time it was not solely down to indignation.

It was not the first moment he'd had cause to wonder if he wanted the

Fat Controller's approval more than maybe he should. Oh, everyone likes to be recognised and for engines, who are so dependent on their boss in virtually every way, that tendency runs pretty strong. Even so, Thomas had long been struck with the humiliating suspicion that his feelings were not quite normal. He knew Donald was right that the Fat Controller ought never to have sent Duck away; he was only too painfully aware the Fat Controller oughtn't have cut all contact with Edward and left him to rust in the back of Tidmouth sheds. Yet this knowledge didn't change his own feelings. Maybe it'd be easier if Thomas could deal with it the way the Twins and Gordon could, with resentment and ceaseless suspicion. But he wasn't built like that. If his trust in his controller was fractured his sense of attachment wasn't and if anything the longing to win a Hatt's trust and praise that he could remember feeling virtually all his life had only deepened. "You're looking in the wrong place. I'm – I'm not the engine for that."

"*We* dinnae get to choose the Big Yin. It's whoever Controller chooses. It looks like that's ye, and the rest ae us will just hae to live wi it."

"Wow. Thanks, that's really flattering."

"'Tis what it is." There was a shrug in Donald's voice. "We cuild do worse. Seems ye *have* gumption, which nae yin knew till now. But ye've aye been a jealous, snippy wee thing – "

"Uhh, ***hi?*** "

" — so ye can hardly blame me and Douggie for watching ye to see what ye'll do. Ye've stood up to Gordon, but ye look up to him more than ye ken — " ("I do not!") " — so who will we have, really? Will we have the engine who takes up for the rest ae us against a whole pack of snarling busses? Or do we have the engine that tries to tear apart his rival in front ae the whole station?"

"I *told* you, I promised I wasn't going to ever have a go at Emily again." (Thomas sounded the most martyred, put-upon engine in seven continents.) "This is why a Controller is more Useful than a Big Yin, Donald. You don't have to worry about other engines if your Controller has a firm hand on the regulator."

Donald was impervious to tank engine sarcasm. This had always been his most annoying quality. "At Emily, nae. Fine, guid. What aboot at the next engine who takes Edward's name in vain?"

"What on earth does that mean?"

"It means ye've never got ower his accident — "

"Why *should* I be over it?"

There was a real wail in Thomas's voice, which Donald doggedly pressed past. " — and ye go off yer nut whenever anyone mentions him wi'oot genuflecting."

"*Oh* , I 'go off my nut,' *do* I?!"

"Ye're turning purple right now. Proves ma point. And I'm nae afeared fuir myself" (the note of slightest contempt in his voice could have devastated armies) "but can ye blame me fuir wondering aboot Emily and Oliver?"

"Oliver!" He was weary of hashing out the Emily problem, but this one shocked new spirit into him.

"Aye. Ever since I braucht him here, ye and he hae aye been scrapping — "

"That wasn't *my* fault! Not all of it, anyway — "

"Stop yer whining, ye sound like a child. Ahm nae sorting out whose fault is what — ye're both foolish, ye deserve each other. All I want to be certain ae is, when the next ye twae hae a spat, will ye be putting tales in Controller's ear?"

Thomas gaped.

"Because in the past, laddie, ye *wuild* have, ye'd complain to anyone who gave ye a hearing. But d'ye understand, ye cannae play the fearless leader and still act the same way as ye did afore. A year ago, ye'd be lucky if Controller would e'en listen to ye carp aboot Ollie. A year from now, if ye go on as ye are, ye cuild convince Controller to upturn Ollie's whole life, if ye take up the notion."

"Why would I do that?! We've got on well enough, this past week!"

"This past week, he says! Aye, ye're getting on well 'cos ye hae wuirk that interests ye and 'cos Gordon's been shut up. Neither ae those will last fuirever. Ye're twae ae a kind in some ways, but ye see too muckle things different."

"Cinders and *ashes*, stop *fussing*, I'm hardly about to try and have Oliver *killed*. I'm doing all this to help Duck stay, aren't I? I was never wild about him either, you know. But I *know* what's happened to steam, on the mainland. You think I'm stupid but I know that much. I don't want anyone sent there, it'd be just – awful."

Thomas's voice cracked on the final word. As heated and incredulous and impatient as both of them were, this brought the temperature down.

They stared at each other for a long minute, then looked away.

The mizzle had died down, and the air was so humid that the partial sun beginning to peer out from the clouds lay heavily on the yard, made anything in its light very hot and heavy.

They were both aware that they had used up much of their break and would soon have to be setting out to their heavy task once more.

"Thank ye fuir all this," said Donald abruptly. From behind closed eyes, he murmured, roughly: "Whatever we might clash oon, it's glad I am ye stood up to Gordon. I dinnae much like to think ae Duck having to turn around and gae waddling richt back to hell."

Even the old, disrespectful mention of Duck's 'waddle' did not suffice to make Thomas crack a smile.

"Oh? Are you *sure* it was worth it? Since now you and everyone have to deal with *all my faults and spite.* Oooooh," he added, competing with Donald's loud groan, "I'm *the boogeyengiiiine.*"

"Away and wheesh yerself, laddie... " Donald sounded impossibly weary. "Ye wanted yer answers. I gave them to ye."

*

This conversation seemed to kick up a lot of soot inside Thomas. It was not merely that he didn't much like the answers: It was that there were a *lot* of them. Like someone had piled up rocks and bricks in his smokebox. He was foggy and sluggish with thoughts as they took the next express, but, since it was Donald that had done the piling, Thomas vaguely thought it was only fair that the other engine had to take on a little more than his share of the load, for that one run. Donald clearly didn't agree — the moment they got in and Thomas got out of his way, he groused straight off, in the *opposite* direction from the water column, with an exhaust chuff that let Thomas know in no uncertain terms that he was disgusted with the tank engine's most recent show.

Thomas, left alone in the gathering gloom, didn't mind the space. He felt overwhelmed. Regretted ever leaving his yard. All those years he had been bored and sad, and it had felt hard to bear but at least it had been *uncomplicated*.

He'd always wanted to be important. But whenever he tried to remember what Donald had said, about how a fleet needs someone who can hold everyone down when the storm comes... someone who can speak up, even to Controllers... Thomas's first driver had often spoken of a monkey paw. Had read him the story, even. Now, all these years later, he felt like somewhere, somehow, that paw was real. Somewhere, somehow, it had curled.

A series of rapid chuffs — and a sudden three-domed hulk of iron rammed right into him.

"OOF." The smaller tank engine was winded. "Ugh, don't *DO* that."

Rosie's face was set into a lower-lip-heavy scowl. The sort of scowl that is only two or so degrees removed from bursting into tears. Thomas recognised it as a look he had sported on his own smokebox before, often enough. "*What did you say to Neville?*"

"To — *oh*." Thomas groaned at the effort of remembering back to the beginning of this stupid, stupid week. As if he had to trawl through eons of time. "Flatten my funnel..."

"I can't *believe* you would start that again!" Rosie began to back up again, but to her credit she managed to contain herself, this time. "Why NOW?"

"I didn't start anything."

"Oh, of *course* you didn't." An ugly sob, threatening to burst out of her, twisted her words. "No one here ever *starts any*thing. It's never anyone's *fault* and anyone who gets the short end of the siding is just too *sensitive* and then Henry up and chooses a SCRAPYARD over us and it's still just *business as usual*... "

"What? Rosie, stay one subject, please." Thomas was puffed out.

"Are you really okay with driving away another engine?!"

"What was it Neville told you?"

In lieu of ramming him again, she whooshed steam. "He didn't *say* anything to me. I can just *tell*. He's embarrassed about something. He's unhappy all *over* again and I can tell that it's because of *you!*"

Cinders and ashes. Even Donald hadn't accused him of being a threat to Neville.

"I really didn't mean to upset him. Honest. I just didn't have time to explain. Look," he added hastily, seeing that she was gearing up to reverse some more, "is he here now? I'll go talk with him."

Rosie's snarl shattered in an instant, her voice suddenly a squeak. "You *will*?"

The surprise was not exactly flattering; Thomas sighed. "Yeah."

"You never have before."

"Then I reckon it's time, isn't it?" He tried to grouse about it, and certainly his wheels were already aching extra-loudly to protest the idea of unnecessary travel. But it was hard to hold fast to this reasonable feeling in the face of Rosie's dawning, shining happiness. It cut through the twilight as brightly as her headlamp.

"That would be great!"

"Then I guess it's worth it. He's over by the shed, yeah?" Thomas squinted through the gathering darkness but Rosie was in such a transport of delight that she didn't appear to hear the question.

"You'll be nice, won't you? *Please* be nice. It's awful to have your best friends not even talking to each other."

Thomas, who had achieved half a wheel turn, stopped short. "Best friends?"

"I mean, Neville's my real best friend," said Rosie, a shrug in her voice, "but I am yours now, yeah? And that counts for something. I *can* be best friends with you both, if you'll just be nice to him."

"I'm — not — !"

But Rosie scampered off with an apparent burst of fresh energy to tackle another delivery, and Thomas was left spluttering outrage to the air.

Outrage — but no actual counter. He supposed he might have said Toby. But he knew he played second fiddle to Toby's real best friend there, too.

Unbelievable, his axles creaked on his way across the grand yard. *She's **so** annoying...*

*

Neville was by the coaling stage, which was in fact by the new Vicarstown sheds — a rather smaller structure than the roundhouse at Tidmouth, and not nearly so grand an affair. Its steel and brick did, however, easily outclass the old open-air shelter that it had replaced. Neville's crew were hard at work cleaning him, one man actually on the roof of the cab, and so Thomas understood this time, at least, why Neville didn't respond to his whistle... which sounded with a more sad and funereal note than Thomas himself had expected to hear.

Neville blinked at him quite slowly, looking around as if double-checking the impossibility of escape.

But he bid Thomas good evening.

"Hi, Neville," said Thomas vaguely — glad enough, of a ready excuse to not look directly at the other engine. "Wow. I've never seen the new sheds up close like this... they built this in the second war, you know."

"That makes sense..." said Neville slowly. "Public shelter."

"'Zacktly. I'm told no engine actually stayed here till '45. It had to serve as a rest centre for townspeople who had been bombed out."

"Mmmm." Neville *did* look depressed — which was why Thomas was still determinedly not looking at him. "I should have thought Vickers..."

"They mostly looked after their own people. They've always ignored islanders who work for anyone else. Well, for us, mostly."

"Nmm."

Oof, why was this so hard? Other engines didn't struggle like this. Edward had always made it look easy.

(*Yeah, well, he was always nice to everyone, from jump. He never had to* —)

"Sooo howwasthemainlandtoday?" Thomas asked loudly, cutting off

the voice inside his smokebox before it could say the a-word.

"It was..." Neville appeared to consider, still watching him from the corner of his eye as though trying to figure out whether the tank engine had come strapped with explosives. "... fine?"

He probably thinks I'm getting unpopular engines sent away, too, thought Thomas. Wow. I am the destroyer of worlds, I am.

"Good. No trouble? Good... that's... great... "

The pause threatened to stretch into a very awkward silence.

"Y'knoww, *that* was the original engine shed. Over there." Thomas heard himself babbling, but truth be told Neville seemed little less relieved than he with the convenience of the topic.

The big engine followed Thomas's eyes to the airy old wall-less structure of corrugated tin roof, a good couple hundred yards closer to the strait. It now sheltered a departmental crane, assorted tools, several vats, oil barrels, and no few weeds. "Hmm..."

"Gee, it looks small." Thomas gazed at for a second, trying to fit everyone in. "I don't actually understand now, how it housed six of us. And some of us were Gordon-sized..." There was about one second of lapsed silence, and he couldn't take it. "D'you know Eight-Seven-Five-One-Oh-Two-Four-Four-Four-Seven-Eight or whoever? I s'pose he was before your time," Thomas went on, having known full well all along that it was so, "but he was stuck over there for a fair bit. Fat Controller couldn't decide if we needed him or if he lost us too many clients... oh, that wasn't his real number," he added, a little horrified as he saw Neville's raised eyebrows and for the first time really, truly understood how their railway must appear to an outsider, "that's only

how I used to joke, it was just a laugh. But he went by a number because *he* wanted to. He thought it was beneath him to accept a name. It's not like we *took* it from him."

Neville's eyebrows lowered. But he still was not quick to speak.

Eurrrghh.

"Speaking of misunderstandings," Thomas went on, at a galloping clip that he wanted to believe came across as light and breezy, "hope I didn't offend you earlier this week. It really was decent of you to offer. I, um. Appreciated it, like."

(*Why* was this so hard?

How did other engines not make fools of themselves?)

And Neville *still* wasn't speaking, to help him out of this mess.

(He missed sarcasm.)

"Really," continued Thomas. "I'm, uh. I'm given to understand that you, um. That you actually do quite a lot for us here, and — ." Ugh. What was he supposed to say? Talking to unknown engines was the worst, actually.

He sort of wished he'd never left his yard.

"And we shouldlike maybegettoknow eachother a bit better," he finished, in a rushed cluster of tripped consonants.

Thomas, always quick to suspect the worst, began to wonder if the bigger engine had some sort of concealed mean streak, and was enjoying listening to him fumble.

"Well, anyway," he finished, speaking now from the other side of his mouth, and manifesting a getaway, "ummm, good talk. We must do this more o— "

"*I didn't know.*"

Neville tossed off these words something almost like abruptly, by his standards. Thomas stopped short, staring in some shock as he realised the other engine wasn't contemptuous: He was still just *shy*.

Then Neville took a breath and explained, in more his usual slow and placid manner: "I didn't know, till this past Monday, that my Trust takes a cut from each train I run. I understand now, why I've… I've not been so welcome."

He looked embarrassed, but it was nothing to how guilty Thomas felt, all at once.

"It's — it's not that." He could feel flustered heat rise in his smokebox, where it ordinarily had no business to be, and was suddenly miserable. "I didn't know either, till the rep — till Emily told me. And she says probably your Trust is right to do as much, anyway." (Because he couldn't look up from his own bufferbeam, he was not aware that Neville's eyebrows began to ever so slowly raise, from the moment Emily's name had been mentioned.) "I've — I've only been a git 'cos I thought you were a diesel at first. I've never seen one, you

know. And I'm — I owe you an apology?" The fact was becoming inescapable and inevitable to him. Of course, he didn't *have* to apologise — there had never been consequences for snubbing the new engine before – but he had been coming, over the course of his long week, to accept he ought to. If he were stronger he could just help Neville with something, the way the Caledonians had made up with him by their help on the express. But he was only a small tank engine and he didn't see that he had any options to discharge his debt except words. "I'm sorry I spread that rumour everywhere when you first arrived."

Neville's eyebrows were not landing any time soon.

"That's an honest mistake," he said at long last, in his usual unhurried way. "It's not being mistaken for a diesel I mind, you know. I've known plenty. They replaced us all on the mainland, but that's how it goes sometimes, and they aren't all bad fellows… some of them are very civil to me."

Thomas heard the implied contrast and knew he wasn't getting off the hook that easily.

He didn't even really *want* to dodge it. It made him feel itchy and oppressed and humiliated to apologize, and yet.

And yet.

"Fine, all right! It's — it's slagging you off and excluding you I'm sorry for. I didn't have any good reason to. None of us did but I started it and I never tried to end it. Truth is — the only thing we North Western engines ever seem to agree on is hating newcomers. I s'pose it's as close as we ever get to being friends. I'm sorry, Neville. You deserved better."

(And yet… it was like flogging himself off his wheels to pull that express.

Anything is better than stagnation.)

Thomas didn't dare look up until what felt like an eternity. Not until Neville said, still as unhurried as ever, "All right. I appreciate you saying that."

Then, thinking it was safe, Thomas did look up — perhaps a little too quickly. For an instant, he caught a look of solemn vulnerability on Neville's face that made Thomas really feel the weight of what they had done all those years in ostracizing him.

Then Neville caught him looking, and he recovered his usual placidity. "Let me be your second engine tonight. Then we'll know all's well between us, going forward."

"Oh, Donald — "

"Could use the rest, I think."

"Erm," began Thomas awkwardly. "I *me-e-an* — "

Neville gave a small smile. A very small one. And yet it was the first time Thomas had ever seen him do any such thing.

"Maybe, just this once," he proposed, voice low, "my Trust doesn't need to hear about this train."

Thomas grinned back.

"What train?" he shot back, in an exaggerated, conspiratorial whisper.

"Oh… any train that perhaps I just so happen to find myself hitching a ride back to Tidmouth on."

"Right you are."

It was a very nice evening. Conditions held clear, the rails were well and dry. Neville's strength caught Thomas by surprise and, while the tank engine still put to on the starts and up the hill, the rest of the time he learned to sink gratefully onto Neville's buffers and to let Q1 carry them all away at a tremendous thundering rate. Thomas was laughing and giddy once they'd come off the train at Tidmouth, having delivered it on time. It was the first time the Nor'wester had come in on-schedule since Duck's return, and a coachful of passengers *applauded*.

But Neville shrank back when Thomas invited him to come back to the big sheds with him. Maybe some other time, he said. He slunk off quickly through the dark of the yard towards the harbour.

If Thomas had any notion of being offended, it vanished once he rolled onto the turntable and saw Gordon.

"Hello, lazybones!"

Gordon had held an unbroken disdainful silence since the hour he'd been sent to the sheds. If he expected them to beg him to stop the punishment he had another thing coming; the others had enjoyed the holiday from the big engine's sermons and boasts. Only now, eyes narrowing, did he snarl, "Did the Fat Controller let that *blundering biscuit-barrel* lay buffers on my train?"

Thomas beamed. "That's right. And paid a pretty pound for the privilege!"

"You," snarled Gordon deliberately, "are all *pathetic*."

"Yes, well," said Thomas, closing his eyes in a tolerant way as he enjoyed his turn 'round, "we can't all live *your* life of leisure, can we now?"

Gordon fumed all night long.

*

The news about Neville on the evening express flashed through Knapford and radiated outward from it, like radio waves. Emily knew about it before Neville had even reached the harbour to settle in for the night, and you might have seen exclamation points puffing from her copper-capped chimney as she hastened to leave her trucks and get herself freshened up for the passenger run home — and, she was determined, another impromptu appointment with her manager. Surely, if they were to the point where Thomas and the Caledonians couldn't handle the thing between the three of them, it was time to revisit her proposal. And that scowling little shunter would be tucked away in shed, she needn't fear being caught out again!

By dint of bossing around her crew vigourously, she appeared by Sir Topham's office in fine nick well before schedule. So early, indeed, that the full lights had not been turned back on for her "sleeper" train, and only the red emergency lights shone.

But when the Fat Controller appeared on the platform, his face told Emily at once that it was *not* the evening to put herself forward.

He strode straight towards her, and Emily fought back a touch of panic in reviewing her conduct over the past month and not detecting anything blameworthy. Perhaps the way she had spoken to Thomas the other evening? (Another twist of panic. She didn't feel she *ought* to be blamed — but this was quite literally the only person in the world who had wanted her in running condition, so if Sir Topham took up Thomas's side, she felt quite unable to argue.)

The blast, however, came from another quarter. "Emily! Could you explain to me, please, why some of our clients are convinced that they have *made financial donations* to my railway?"

If you had looked on the Stirling Single at that moment, you would have seen her slowly rendered into greyscale.

"I… could…"

Sir Topham stared up at her for a moment with *such* disbelief and exasperation. Emily saw that he had come hoping, and maybe even expecting, that she would at least show some confusion — and that made the bottom drop out of her frames faster than anything else could have.

"I — never authorised — any fundraising drives." Each word was steel-edged. Maybe to reinforce them against his own rising anger so that

he wouldn't blow up too soon. "I never — even — *heard* — of the matter."

"No, sir."

"Explain it to me, then."

Voice still very, very small, Emily ventured a halting phrase here and there, until her narrative was well underway. "It was — ages ago, sir… I never thought it would still… when I was new here… well, I was coming up on my first year… the end of it… and we hadn't… we hadn't had any updates about repairing Edward, sir. The others were starting to understand — well, they had begun to give up hope, some of them. *I* didn't" (*not yet, anyway*) "but I thought no news was probably bad news, and I… I wanted to help. And so did some of our people, sir! Some of the schoolchildren… the older ones, you know… we spoke about it sometimes, and one of the big girls and I decided to find something we could do. I knew a bit about fundraising, I thought, because my old trust always had to make appeals for each phase of my building and for all my tests, and I spoke with our best donors regularly, before you bought me." The Fat Controller's face was still as flint, not having relaxed even one fraction, but Emily gained some courage from her explanation, and spoke more and more passionately. "So we worked together, she and I — we both spoke to people about our Cause, and she held the money. It seemed to be going so well at first! Loads of — erm, many, many people gave a little, and some gave a good bit. The branch line people loved Edward, sir, it was — " She swallowed. After the very dispiriting start she'd had, it had moved her very deeply, and refreshed her determination to make a success of her service, to see the evidence of how important an engine could be to its territory. And it wasn't that she had ever before or since entirely given up. But there was something that *hurt* in remembering so viscerally how capable of optimism and romanticism she'd still been, back then.

Anyway, the Fat Controller had held up a hand. "When you say 'people,' can it be hoped you mean 'passengers'?"

"Passengers, yes sir, but some clients as well."

"Clients. As in — business owners." The Fat Controller groaned audibly at her lack of disagreement. "And when we say 'many' people...?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't tell you," she said desperately. "My friend only kept a record of the major gifts — there were nine of them — we could hardly keep track of everyone's little donations. It felt like many at the time, but it — it mightn't have been."

"There is a record?"

"There… *was*," hesitated Emily. "This was years ago now we gave it up, sir. She went off to uni, my friend I mean, and then her family moved to the Mainland too, so I haven't had contact with her. We could probably get in touch with her, though," she offered hopefully.

"Emily," said the Fat Controller, with a gravity that was about as bad as shouting or sarcasm, "what was the total?"

"Not much," said Emily sadly. "We thought it was at first, but then I… I starting asking the staff, and it turned out that it wasn't very much at all. Driver said the total wasn't enough to keep me in coal for a fortnight. I mean, *none* of your people knew, sir. I put all my questions as hypothetical, you know — they thought it was idle curiosity. But I asked a good many railwaymen a good many ways, hoping for a different picture, and my friends did some research too, at a few different libraries, but it became obvious that we hadn't really helped after all. I realised it wouldn't help you and the others would probably say it was an insult and hate me worse than ever so I just… when my friend finished school here she was to keep the money safe while I kept working on raising more but I sort of, I sort of gave it up, sir. I was so awfully embarrassed and discouraged and there didn't seem to be any good in it."

The Fat Controller mouthed something aside that looked a lot like '*Small mercies,*' and Emily reddened more hotly than ever even as he swiftly collected himself and looked on her squarely. "It might not have been much so far as vintage locomotive repair, but it still sounds like a lot to a private individual! Emily, you and those children collected that money under *false pretenses*. No one will write the newspapers about the silliness of the children, but *you* represent the railway — everything you do reflects on the railway, reflects on *me!* I've received several complaints that I've mismanaged donations, and you can imagine what a fool I've made of myself denying that I've accepted any such thing."

"Mis-mismanaged?"

"Yes, Emily, mismanaged! People donated to a repair fund; naturally they feel we are now accountable to them. All week I have been facing angry questions — a rising wave of talk that I am a beggar who is irresponsible with money! And you must have known all along that you were doing wrong, by your own account you kept it a secret, even from your own driver!"

"That was Edward's driver," she reminded him. Her cheeks were flaming and she was perilously close to dissolving into tears but before she did she *would* make sure the record was correct even if she herself didn't think it absolved her. "I couldn't, I wanted it to be a surprise, I couldn't tell them. And I thought, I thought, if word got 'round too early, Gor — the others would prob'ly find some way to make it sound all horrid and wrong. It seemed like I *had* to keep low till we had a respectable sum to offer. I was foolish, of course, I know that now. It would have helped if I had sought advice, there was so much I didn't know then."

"More than advice, you needed PERMISSION," the Fat Controller emphasised. "Have you been conducting any other fundraising drives I ought to know about, pray tell?"

"No, sir," she said earnestly. But only after she had spent a moment thinking back on it. In truth Emily "got up" a good many schemes and bright ideas. "I'm really sorry, sir. Shall I have word sent to the girl, and have her call and send the money?"

He sighed. "No… if there were never complete records there's no point. And I won't live this down and restore my good name by hiding behind a sixth-former."

"Oh, no sir, she's grown-up, now... " Emily's voice trailed off at the Fat Controller's warning look. She dropped her gaze, feeling as though she were shrinking.

It may sound funny, how small a railway engine can feel in the face of a human who is about a fingers-width to them. But then, any decent person knows what it's like to get on the wrong side of your conscience — and we humans often think of *that* as voiced by something the size of a cricket.

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" she mumbled.

"You can best help me now by saying nothing, to anyone. Not until I've spoken with our lawyer. He will likely come to question you himself."

"L-Lawyer?" She was familiar with lawyers only in the context of her builders' financial difficulties, and the aftermath of Incidents. It didn't sound good.

"Yes, Emily. We will both face consequences from this matter, and we need legal counsel to help minimise them. I hope I may trust you to

remain silent on this matter until further notice. Quite a lot may depend on it." At her murmur of agreement he turned to make his departure.

He left in his wake a very anxious, agitated engine, insides hissing as she tried to keep all that was sloshing about inside of her — and thankful, in that moment, for the cover of the station's darkness.

Unprepared, in that moment, for the Fat Controller to make another turn on his heel. "You did not confide in anyone on this whole railway..."

He rounded back towards her slowly, half-cast in shadow, and more still than she'd ever known him. The darkness did not entirely conceal an unheard-of softness in his eye, as he gazed upon his engine's unhappy face.

"Was it so bad as that?"

His quiet voice made Emily gulp. With an effort, she blinked and swallowed the last of her roiling emotions.

It was.

It was that bad.

They were horrid to me. Horrid.

I used to sob my firebars out wishing I'd never come here.

Even though coming here saved my LIFE.

"It was..." She swallowed once more, hastily, this time to find the necessary air to speak. "It was hard on everyone. Sir." The weight of his gaze felt no more tolerable, and she hissed sadly. "It's — it's all right, sir. I'm still glad I came. And — and, I think I understand the others. They — they already hadn't had a lot to hang on to. And — then Edward fell. And Duck fell. Pieces of all the others went right down along with them. And — I think they sort of felt they'd lost you, too — maybe that was the worst of all. They thought none of them mattered to you, except Gordon. It was — a lot. It was a lot, and they're not over it yet, but they're getting over it a bit now, you know, and I. I think it will be all right! *I'm* all right," she added, for the Fat Controller's gaze still had not shifted, and she could no longer avoid answering what she knew was the real question, all along. "Nowadays — I think I'm one of the best off around here, actually — me and Toby are. I'm — I'm really sorry I caused you trouble with our people, sir. I'm glad you brought me to your railway, truly. I want to make you proud. We all do, sir."

She pinned her mouth shut after that, feeling (for perhaps once in her life) that she'd already said more than enough. Yet it was a long moment before Sir Topham so much as twitched in reaction — and it *felt* longer still.

When he did finally speak, it was only after he slowly doffed his hat to her.

"We have been very lucky in you." And then, with the Stirling Single still blinking, he reaffixed his hat and turned once more to leave, as if he had not just said anything special, as if he had not left a lump of coal in the back of her mouth. "Good night, Emily. Not a word of this to anyone, remember."

She was hardly about to forget.

Chapter End Notes

We're heading towards the climax! 👀 I'd love to know your reactions, predictions, or questions (or suggested tracks for the chapter playlists?) while I get cracking on Chapter 10.

Chapter 10: Breaking Point

Chapter Notes

Cheers to the Railway Series, for celebrating its 80th anniversary, this past Monday!

And cheers to AngrySkarloey, for test-driving this installment. 💗

Thank you to her and also to everyone commenting/discussing.

Optional mood music for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

10: Breaking Point

"Say, Tank Engine... say..."

A low-geared giggle.

"Oi! Tank Engine... you quite all right there, lad?..."

He was blearily coming to, discerning through dream-fog some all-too-real grinding and chortling, when —

"***Beep****-beep-beep-beep-beeeep!"*

"AAAAUGHH!"

Thomas nearly jumped the siding.

If he'd done it, and leapt to the left, he would have derailed right into the wooden fence that separated the railyard from the Big Station's car park.

In theory the fence deterred fare-hoppers. In practice, the leering, hollering trucks idle in the railyard — and the often-muddy gravel stretch between the yard and the paved lot — were the stronger inducements for any morally-loose Knapfordians to decide that it was simply less trouble to follow procedure.

Anyway, the wide gap in the two thin horizontal slats meant one's view of How The Other Half Lived was almost entirely unobscured. Thomas found, when he came to, that the main voice hollering to him was a low-slung bus (no second deck). They were not face on, as the busses who had taunted Thomas and Douglas a few days ago had been. *This* bus was idling almost parallel to the fence — and yet Thomas could see just enough of the grille to be absolutely blinded by the bus's smug grin.

"You need to get off that Wild Nor'wester, lad," he chuckled.

"You need to mind your own business!"

Thomas winced — his voice was embarrassingly sleep-strained, and shrill — but he glowered more darkly still when the bus laughed it off.

"Your business is ours to mind, isn't it? You'd better bring that Big Blue Blimp of yours out of shed — you're bleeding passengers." And he beeped five times, in rapid celebration.

"They should cite you for sounding off on your horn like that so early," Thomas groaned. "You're a Public Nuisance!"

The bus laughed, and honked a few more times. "It's two o'clock, lazybones! Hadn't you better prepare for your next big run?"

"That's not for hours yet!"

"'Bout how long it takes you old teapots to get ready, isn't it?"

The bus was blatantly showing off for the wheel-locked canteen van and all the parked cars, most of whom seemed very ready to oblige him with their attention, titters, and admiration. Thomas looked on the scene with disgust. *Internal combustion... it only ever made vehicles stupider*. And too easily impressed. From this angle, Thomas was getting an eyeful of the racing stripes and crazy colours and star emblem and it all was maybe even harder to take than the cheeky smirk.

"Still less time than it would take you to putter all the way to Vicarstown," Thomas groused.

Somehow, the bus glowed even brighter. "Oho! Is that a challenge?"

"It's a challenge for you to go away."

"Can't." The bus beamed. "Must stay here till my next driver comes off the train."

"Your driver goes to work by rail?"

Thomas sniggered, but the bus was unaffected. "That she does. So I'll likely be waiting around a while, eh?"

He shimmied his wheels back and forth, delighted with himself, when Thomas scowled.

"You're not looking too well," the bus continued, brisk and cheery. "Hadn't you better tell that controller of yours you need some relief?"

A frown was tugging at Thomas – a vague memory. It seemed to him he wanted to mentally re-paint this vehicle into the old red livery that one of Velocity Ltd's constituent bus companies had used back in the day. When he did he found that he knew this face. "You're that bus from the Ffarquhar depot. The one Toby and Edward used to grumble about. Aren't you?"

To realise it *aloud* was a mistake. The bus flashed Thomas an award-winning grin.

"*Did* they?" He revved his engine once or twice. "Splendid to hear that I was never far from their minds! They were wily old pros, you know, and liked to act like I wasn't getting at them."

"Uhh, Toby's still a wily old pro. *You* may have been pulled off that route — 'surplus to requirements,' weren't you? You busses don't last long. But Toby's still there."

"Of course he is." The bus's smile didn't waver. "He'll be chuffing back and forth in that groove till Armageddon, I don't doubt. Six days,

week in and week out, and a little morning bustle for the church crowd on Sundays. That's you steam engines all over, isn't it? Tell him Bertie says semi-retirement is quite a lark, and he should get right on it. He won't listen, of course — stubborn old stick-in-the-mud — but you tell him Bertie Bus has some sound advice for him anyway."

Thomas scoffed. "Yeah. I'll get right on that."

"Excellent. And then, for you, Tank Engine — " The bus rolled backwards, and made a little three-point turn to look at Thomas face-on, his eyes roving Thomas from funnel to tyres " — mmmmm, yes. Get Gordon back on his train, or we'll be taking your Express passengers."

" 'We'? You probably haven't logged five hundred miles this calendar year."

"I *hadn't*. Till now! We're instituting an express service ourselves now, you know. Rustled up me and the other oldies to fill in on the Locals. And I'm having a lovely time, don't get me wrong — I shan't complain, if we keep it up — but just giving you a friendly word of warning... it won't be much fun, beating *you*. After a while we'll want to show we can beat the Big Wheel himself."

"You can't," scoffed Thomas. "You lot have tried this before. Gordon beats you easy, every time."

"Well, I don't see Gordon right now. I see *you*, and you're no very splendid sight."

Behind the sooty build-up of the day's work thus far, Thomas blushed brightly.

"What," he taunted, "bitter you bet on me to tap out last week? Better luck next — "

"No, no," laughed the bus. "Not I. I knew you'd last longer than any of the rest thought. I tell you, I know steam engines. No," he added casually, right as Thomas was beginning to re-inflate, "I placed my bet on next Thursday evening."

"Oi!"

"It's no insult! They all had a good laugh at me — at first. Now most of them are out of the running and they're owning that old Bertie may know a thing or two. But," he added, with a touch of unexpected seriousness, "I think I'd rather lose, than see you break down. If the Big Wheel *is* being disciplined, can't you lot put together a deputation for him? It seems enough, unless he killed someone. And maybe even then..."

"Gordon's not worried about you lot," scoffed Thomas — as if anyone had much any idea of what Gordon was thinking, lately. He had clammed up again, after his one outburst about Neville.

"Oho, we're small change for him, are we?" The bus looked amused rather than offended. "Well, what about Catherine, then?"

"Who?"

"The lovely emerald-green lass. Over my old stomping grounds."

"You mean *Emily?*"

"Emily, is it? We call her Catherine. Because of the wheel, you know." The bus winked, then sobered fractionally once more. "She's good. If you can't haul Gordon out of hiding, then you should give the train to her. She might be some competition!"

Thomas's entire smokebox transformed into a brittle smile. "Hey. Hey, come here," he said... pleasantly.

The cars tittered again, but it was in a slightly different tone as they eyed the bus, seeing what he would do.

He only quirked an eyebrow at the tank engine, and scoffed.

"No, no." Thomas was all sweetness... well, mostly. "For real. 'Bertie', right? Come over here, then. After all, you *can*, right?"

The cars were snickering outright now, but their jeering now was as much for the bus as it was for him. The bus laughed, too, but was almost pushed forward by the force of his audience's whooping and chorus of "oooooooo"s.

"There you go," encouraged Thomas, and then feigned awe and respect as Bertie strutted over the gravel section up to the gate, shimmying his wheels to show off his ability to go wherever he wished, in contrast to certain track-bound railway engines that he might name. “Ohh, yes indeed 'Bertie,' we're all *soo* impressed — no, no, don't be shy, come on, I have a secret to share with you — "

Despite Thomas's angelic expression, Bertie had to have some

suspicions about where this was heading. Rather than back down, however, he closed the last gap between him and the fence. This left him and the looming tank engine only four feet apart.

So he got the full force of Thomas wheeshing him soundly.

He spluttered from the hot vapour and ash, not entirely devoid of a laugh, even as the cars and canteen van hooted at them both.

"Byyyye, Bobby," said Thomas, whistling as he puffed on, ready to find a more private spot for his nap. "Do share more advice some other time!"

*

There had been a time when the little tank engine's days seemed to drag on endlessly, like sticky pitch leaking from a busted barrel under a hot sun.

Now the days hit him one after another, hard and fast, like the blows of a jackhammer. It was a monotony far more... nightmare-ish.

There was no other word for what he was stuck in, although Thomas pressed his lips tight against any complaint. He would give *none* of them the satisfaction of laughing at him — least of all Gordon! Gordon, whose glowering and poisonous fuming in his corner of the shed each night and morning just about made it all worth it.

Every morning now, the Fat Controller visited the shed — just like old days — and, after greeting them all good morning, would turn with unfailing courtesy to Gordon and ask if he had a message to send to his colleague at the Works. Gordon never did, so the Fat Controller (occasionally with a paternal cluck of his tongue, which had made Thomas giggle the first couple times) would turn to the allocation of the day's jobs, beginning of course with who was to cover the express.

Thomas was still on every train, but Neville was now sometimes hired on for the last evening run and it cleared some much-needed space in the Twins' schedules. Indeed everyone was – with visible relief — becoming quite friendly with Neville, now that it was clear there was no looming social police-engine that might punish them for it. Neville seemed a bit happier for it (and Rosie *much* the happier), but he had still gently declined, when Thomas had again awkwardly invited him to the Big Shed, and promised to make his introductions. "Good call," Thomas had admitted, "Gordon's no fun to bunk with. You know, you're pretty smart… for a diesel. Just kidding!" he'd added, when sudden panic and dread had crossed the new engine's face.

But Neville couldn't help them every evening (apparently he often picked up goods coming *back* from Manchester, and the time that took varied day to day). And, even when he did, Thomas was always bound to the train.

By this point he could have cried every time he was coupled onto that load, and screamed any time a pilot engine backed onto him, trapping him in a seventy-mile struggle. Even with another engine giving them a push to start, it was never obvious that they *would* start — it was a relief every time, once they had struggled to get the whole thing moving. At Crovan's Gate they *got* no push. It was a surprise each and every time they finally managed to get away. But the temptation to stop and give sore wheels and axles a rest was present through most of the journey. Thomas had heard Sodor called a 'little island' many a time. But it wasn't little when you measured it from end to end with his wheelbase, and he struggled every yard of it, with that load. He tried a prodigious amount of chants and mantras in turn. He tried to turn the worst moments into visions of excitement and glory, to turn the slog into something grand, but for once his imagination failed

him. He *was* doing something grand. It was just too hard and too heavy to be exciting.

And yet any time the Fat Controller's order turned into a question — "Can you take the next one, Thomas?" — he never hesitated. *Yes.*

He couldn't quit now. Not after all that effort he'd put into getting everyone onside, not after all the confident promises he'd made. Besides, he was doing the right thing... he was very sure of that. Very sure that he was putting into action the things Edward had said to him, right before...

Yet, in the thick of it, in the soreness and exhaustion of it, in the middle of each of the struggling trains, the fuel that really kept him going during the worst moments was very simple:

Spite.

And perhaps a dash of wilful self-destruction.

This was certainly still better than the thought of how much Gordon would relish holding it over him and everyone else for the next sixty years, if Thomas were to give up. *You got above your station, little Thomas…*

The vision of it infuriated him so much that it was always good for at least another fifteen minutes' massive effort. Never. Not while he still had a pound of steam in his boiler. Not while he still had six wheels…

And yet, for all his exasperations, actual and imagined, when one afternoon at Vicarstown Douglas biffed his buffers to gently wake him

from a deep sleep for their next train, Thomas groaned awake and observed: "Y'kno-o-o-w—" His words at first were swallowed in a massive yawn. "Y'know, Gordon busts his ball bearings every day… we could fuss less over his clicky firebox."

"What's that, Thomas?" called Rosie from further in the sidings, sounding harried.

Douglas grinned. "The wee tank engine's gane delirious, poor lad."

"Oh stuff it…" Thomas finally opened his eyes, to squint a glare.

Douglas's smile didn't waver in the face of that, but sobriety cast a shadow over his face after he studied Thomas. "Ye're not sounding ye best."

"Ijustneedtohavemyaxlesgreasedb'forewego," muttered Thomas, whose eyelids were sinking again. Just *one more minute*…

Douglas considered him further. "Ye need the night aff," he announced at last. "I'll take it."

Thomas yawned. "Neville's going to be too late, tonight. You can't ta-a-a-ke it on your own…"

"I'll figure oot something, this once. Hae ye a guid night's sleep, laddie. Ye'll be back on the next turn the morra."

Thomas was anxious (even as every part he possessed was straining

for the chance offered). "But how will it get back here tomorrow? If there's only one engine available at Tidmouth, the Fat Controller might have to put the replica on this train…"

"Never happen, dinna fash yerself. Rest ye aisy," he insisted, a little more loudly, drowning out further objection.

And Thomas put up no more resistance. "Thanks…" he muttered.

In five minutes he was in a state of black oblivion. He did not come to until the next morning, not much more than an hour before the express was due again.

He never did learn how the train had gone out — from how close-mouthed everyone was, he suspected sometimes that the Fat Controller had been very angry and that Douglas got in some trouble with him (but then, Douglas was usually in that state). It almost seemed that Douglas had somehow managed to take it by himself and that, to preserve the last shred of Gordon's pride, no one ever admitted it. If that's what had happened, however, Douglas was never able to give the feat an encore. When the Express returned the next morning, it was pulled by Donald and —

"Duck!"

Thomas was shocked. He would have been happy to see Duck out of the Works again, if he could be quite sure that this was what was happening. However, he thought he might still be dreaming.

And dreaming very vividly, for Duck was in North Western blue with red lining.

" 'Morning, Thomas," said Duck coolly.

"Um," said Thomas lamely. "Feeling better?"

"Much. I should be better help on the train today than I was last time."

"We managed just fine," said Thomas proudly. But as Donald had an urgent fast goods back to Brendam and it would be just him and Duck from then on, he was very glad to find, almost immediately at their start, that Duck was indeed much better fit now than he'd been on arrival. It was hard, of course. But the two of them got the train on in fine style. Duck insisted they sand the rails well before they began, and Thomas hollered a few tips on the way where it was fine to slacken and where it was imperative to keep up a good head of steam. He hadn't realised till now, but he was becoming quite familiar with the twists and turns of the run.

It was a lovely day. Duck was greeted everywhere, at every station and turn. Of course, not all was well — Duck's continued quietude gave Thomas a pang, and the new blue livery unsettled too, there was something that simply wasn't *right* about it.

But, if Thomas knew nothing else, he knew how to live in an imperfect world. This unlooked-for relief was still almost ecstasy. Oh, surely there were challenges ahead, but he was still confident that they had pulled off something important. A good deed, and a turning point. Duck was back from exile, *really* back, there was hardly any sending him away now that they had mended him – much less repainted him in N.W.R. colours! And that was something righted. It was something.

*(And **I** was the one who did it. Everyone knows that…)*

But, that night, it still remained for Duck to re-enter Tidmouth Shed.

And this is where the high water receded.

The shed was already near full when Duck arrived — fuller than it had been in days. Thomas and Gordon had been alone here many a night since that first silent Sunday in the roundhouse. Tonight, however, Oliver and the Scottish twins had all made their arrangements during the course of the day to be here – Duck's first proper night back was not to be missed!

But when they again saw Duck in the metal, they all refrained from whistling… sensing that the foreign-looking pannier tank might shatter, somehow, at too boisterous a greeting. They only smiled (more or less) and watched respectfully as Duck rolled onto the turntable... which jammed to a halt, once it was facing Gordon.

Gordon, who (while not actually saying another intelligible word) had thawed, after the Neville incident, to the point of the occasional harrumph and huff (and rather homey and familiar it felt, too), stared at Duck.

The temperature in the sheds dropped by five degrees.

And Duck locked his eyes and stared back. Dull, glassy, glum-mouthed Duck, who had been avoiding most eyes since his peculiar return. He locked onto Gordon's gaze and held it.

The atmosphere iced over. The others looked on in muted foreboding.

Duck's lip — almost — curled. He — almost — showed some sign of

animation.

His fireman, with a muttered curse, forced the turntable back into motion. Once it came to another stop, Duck slowly and rigidly rolled back into the berth between Thomas and Donald. Well away from Gordon — yet Duck all the while held Gordon's silent snarl with his own blank, blazing eyes.

Then he broke off the locked stare, turned his attention to Donald, made some mild inquiry.

A relieved murmur of talk broke out among the Caledonians and the Westerners — yes, even Oliver asked a question or two, although under Gordon's icy eye he was very subdued, and affected boredom.

Thomas, for his part, couldn't partake. He stayed awake an extra quarter-hour that night, staring with vacant anxiety beyond his berth door, feeling sick in his cooling firebox. He hadn't anticipated this — hadn't thought of it. (*You never think things through*.)

The light at the end of the tunnel hadn't arrived, after all. In fact, the light was snuffed out, and the tunnel was threatening to cave in. The Twins were worn down, Gordon and Oliver's friendship was in tatters, the Fat Controller had spent money mending Duck and leasing Neville that he manifestly could not afford, the busses were on the verge of pulling their Express out from under them...

And, after all that, Gordon was as haughty and stubborn as ever, persisting in a strike that threatened to take down their whole railway – while Duck hardly seemed any happier than he'd have been in that scrapyard.

He'd jumped in so blindly, the day Duck had returned. But what had

he expected? Something any better than this? No wonder, that even the Twins had been none too quick to sign onto his half-baked idea…

They all urgently needed the two engines to make peace, if they had even a hope of recovering their position against the roads, yet that reconciliation looked further away than ever... Thomas had no idea how it could be overcome.

But it didn't take long until exhaustion overcame him.

*

The next morning, he was right back to the worry and the overwhelm. He trudged creakily to washdown — he would have liked to skip it, but full washdowns were only offered twice a month and they were mandatory — and once there he didn't much notice the cleaning process at all, indifferent to soap and hose alike, staring vacantly ahead.

Oliver rolled in, toward the end. "Say, you look blue," he said — and then chortled at his own joke.

Thomas's eyes rose from the sleepers only slowly. "Huh?"

"Blue. You look — oh, forget it. Anyway, what's up with you? Your fireman die or something?"

That was the sort of bafflingly strange remark that Oliver made a little too often, and that would have annoyed Thomas at most any other time. That morning, he took no notice.

"I dunno, Oliver, it's just..."

He heaved an enormous, pained, shaky sigh.

"Have you ever felt like you've gone and made the biggest, most *reckless* mistake possible? Like you've plunged *everyone* left that you care about into a huge mess and you'd give anything to take it back but it's too late and you're just... stuck?"

"Yep," said Oliver at once.

Thomas glanced at him again... only now really seeing the other engine.

"*So* many times, when I was hiding from the diesel patrols, and my crew were scraping just to get us by..."

Oh. Of course.

Thomas's eyes slid away again. Well, he'd been stupid to try to confide in Oliver anyway — it was just that he was running short on options. At least over here at *this* Big Station. He wondered faintly, for just a second, what it would be like to live over at the *other* Big Station, with Rosie and Neville. But it was just a fantasy (Neville wasn't shedded there, himself) and anyway, he was just a silly heedless little engine and he didn't deserve it.

It took him several minutes to realise the silence. He glanced over again, slowly, to find Oliver enjoying the attention of the cleaners —

but still, every so often, looking over at Thomas, with a bit of bemused, patient interest.

"You stopped talking," said Thomas, stupidly.

Oliver just grinned. "Were you going to listen to me go on about it again?"

"No."

"Well, there you are then."

The autotank winked, and Thomas couldn't exactly go so far as to grin back at him.

He was surprised, though. Almost impressed.

"Look," continued Oliver, with a self-important little air that would have made Thomas consider murdering him, any other time, "there's no point second-guessing yourself now. You wanted to save your friend this time, didn't you? You've done that, it's stupid to regret it. Only way out is through."

"You really think I did the right thing?"

"No, I think it was stupid," said Oliver frankly. "Rash, ill-counselled *inanity*. Gordon always told me That Engine was a troublemaker and I expect he's right, we've had nothing but trouble since his return. This whole new timetable is stupid. I'm just saying, you lot already have

everything all well and mixed up, it's full steam ahead and there's no point asking Driver to wind back your reverser now."

Thomas stared. "That's not bad advice," he mumbled... a bit unwillingly.

Particularly because this admission *did* make Oliver light up. "I know. I give fantastic advice. You all should listen to me more."

Thomas scoffed, and Oliver laughed.

It was with considerably less anxiety than Thomas continued to mull. He could not see a solution to the Gordon-Duck impasse (and maybe it was better that he didn't*, maybe if I thought I had a bright idea I'd just rush in and muck it up anyway*...) Anyway, he'd done what he could and the others needn't have gone along with the thing. It was the notion of public humiliation that had specially depressed him, the night before — but if the others were all really so much more sensible and worldly than he was, then they could share in the failure! And in the end it was always the Fat Controller who gave the orders, after all: it wasn't like Thomas had forced him.

Indeed it only now occurred to Thomas that the Fat Controller had not visited the sheds that morning — his first omission of that ritual in a little while now. His eyes travelled towards station headquarters, where the man was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, not much was going on at all, except that a sort of little rostrum seemed to have been set up on platform 1.

Oliver followed Thomas's eyes. "Yeah, d'you know what was going on there last night?"

"Last night? No. Was the Fat Controller, like — yelling at someone?"

Sir Topham generally required elevation either for discipline or for grand announcements, and this didn't quite have the air of that second one. "Or was it about Duck?"

"*I don't know*." Oliver sounded impatient... though in a wary, reserved sort of way. He closed his eyes. "There was a crowd of passenger-type people at the station last night. A lot of them farmers, I think, from along the Ffarquhar line — but not all. *I* was told to sod off, in so many words. But the Fat Controller had the replica there." The autotank pulled a face — but again, only a very slight one. "So I reckon *she* knows all about it, anyway."

Thomas, reluctantly but somehow inexorably, opened his mouth. "... we can probably just... call her — "

And then he bunked it. Just like Edward used to.

(Edward, who had been so good at swallowing his hurt and being considerate to everyone... until he'd finally found the limit of his endurance…

The light and the hope had died in his eyes, that first day *she* rolled onto the turntable. Thomas had been right there. He had seen it.)

" — call her her name," he finished, lamely.

Oliver snorted. Then he opened his eyes to peer beadily at the station, before fixing his furrowed brow on Thomas. "I know you're flying high and everything, now that you've gone and got the Fat Controller clipping Gordon's wings." His tone was rather hard once more. Gordon's behaviour had not, it seemed, eroded the core of Oliver's stout loyalty. "But you know, don't you, that it won't be you who benefits in the long run. It'll be *her*."

Thomas hadn't realised — consciously. Unconsciously, he found he... wasn't surprised, that Emily was in on secrets with the Fat Controller. (Unconsciously, he knew he'd wheeshed Bertie the bus at the moment he had because he was sore to know that he'd have to cede this spotlight to her, sooner or later....)

But it hardly mattered. She'd always taken what he most wanted from him, from day one. So it would happen again? Well, if Oliver thought so, he was probably right. Thomas had bigger concerns. Yesterday morning the idea of her gaining yet another privilege that ought have been his would have inflamed him but *this* morning, full of worry for the prospects of the whole railway, it simply wasn't so big an issue.

"All right, Oliver," sighed Thomas, closing his own eyes, weary as if he'd already done a round trip. "I know you and Emily had a messy break-up — but leave me out of your relationship drama, okay?"

It was sort of worth it, to hear Oliver do some Gordonian spluttering. And to ignore it, as he was driven off to prepare for his first train.

But he felt no ill will. No matter how ridiculous Oliver was in some ways, he had calmed Thomas's rising panic and Thomas was grateful to him, really.

*

But everything from that day forward was uphill.

Night after night, Thomas stole glances at Gordon's and Duck's faces — granite and unyielding even in sleep. If they did sleep. Thomas did not think either engine was doing very much of it.

He did attempt to speak to Duck about the matter. But Duck — without ever appearing to hurry — made himself scarce, between their trains. He'd take up some piece of work, and Thomas would be far too puffed-out to chase after him. That Saturday night, Oliver came to Tidmouth, but Duck stayed on the Twins' branch line. Thomas was rather annoyed.

On Monday morning, the busses' new non-stop express service began. There was quite a bit of buzz — local newspapers sent people with cameras to take long shots of a proud and spotless double-decker bus, complete with a green banner that read EXPRESS, pulled up at the stop parallel to the railway station... where the two tank engines in their identical company colours stood by, sooty and old-fashioned.

Throughout that week, Thomas found himself gazing sidelong at more and more busses growling back and forth along the road at a steady sixty or sixty-five — for it took a good many busses, departing at staggered intervals throughout the day, to supply the capacity that the Wild Nor'wester could carry in two round trips. Sodor's main roadway was notoriously twisty, and the busses did not often get a good straight — but, when one did, they typically vroomed ahead, Thomas and Duck helpless to match the bus until it was yielded to some road obstruction. The busses made it look *easy*. Thomas's steam pressure would dip as he wondered if maybe they were right about being the superior technology. Must be nice, to not have to pull twelve clumsy, troublesome, *weighty* coaches — hard to think of any justification for them, in those moments! Well, ten coaches — the Fat Controller had long ago given permission for them to leave two off. After the busses' non-stop service was instituted, they did not even fill those, and the train shrank and swelled in size as the week went on.

Mostly shrank.

Thomas hoped the loss of so many passengers would spark a change somewhere, anywhere. But the Fat Controller did not flinch. Duck spoke rather little as he went about his work. Gordon, of course, stayed put in the shed, and said even less. The atmosphere each night remained distinctly chilly — for the five or so minutes Thomas was generally awake for it.

Wednesday morning saw Thomas oversleep. Duck had to bodily haul him out of the sheds all the way to Knapford before his fire was stirred, and he found himself backing down on the train.

"'m'fine," Thomas announced through a yawn, albeit no one had asked him. "I was thinking last night..."

The guard blew the whistle, and they started with a jolt, so he was not able to share until later. This was for the best, as he'd almost forgot that it wasn't something one could discuss in front of Duck anyway! But during his midday break he prevailed on his driver to let them take a very light pick-up goods to Wellsworth so that he could confer with the Little Caledonian contingent.

Because he had learned, see. You had to think things through. You had to have a *plan*.

And it was best to seek advice from the others. Because sometimes other engines had useful input. Actually.

But Thomas thought his idea was pretty good. For the railway to move forward, Gordon and Duck must be reconciled. But they didn't want to be reconciled (and small blame to Duck, for that). So they needed a common enemy, right? And Thomas had at last hit upon the one figure on the whole island whom he knew those two loathed in equal measure: *George the steamroller*. If the Little Caley could help him figure out how to get George over to Tidmouth to run his mouth,

then...

"A rock?"

"Huh?" Thomas blinked at the interruption.

Douglas's eyebrows were knit with an air of great seriousness. It was all the worse when he had a twin next to him wearing the exact same expression — doubling the effect. "A rock. Is it a rock ye've been livin' under?"

Oliver chortled, too. "That smarmy, spluttering old dozer was replaced years ago! Even out here, the motorways department isn't running steam, of all things… You know, I think you've actually been asleep the entire time I've been on this island, until like twelve days ago. *Asleep*."

"Oh." Some ghost of a younger engine, who would have been appalled to hear about the withdrawal even of his worst enemy, who knew that something in the world wasn't right if George Steamroller was not chuffering 'round doing the work he'd gloried in, stirred in the ashes of Thomas's fire…

And then it burned out. "Huh. Bet his scrapyard wasn't paved... Hope he died raging about it."

"Brutal," observed Donald (not, however, with disapproval).

"But no," said Oliver. "He's on the mainland. Private owner. *Preserved*."

Thomas pulled a face. "Someone paid *money* for him?"

"Money, ha!" Douglas spat in disgust. "Laddie, it was a *bidding war*. Richt here at oor own Crosby Fair. Those men *fought* over him."

"Word is tha' the winner regrets it all, noo." Donald grinned. "Too late."

Thomas could see it. "Yeah, George didn't exactly have the temperament for that sort of thing."

"They paid us to ship him to Barrow," smirked Douglas. "He had to leave on my goods. Aye, and he was fit to be coupled."

"No reason he couldn't have gone himself," agreed Oliver. "What a waste! He could still move just fine. But it *was* fun, watching him spit and swear during loading."

Thomas indulged a little scoff. But the problem remained. The one figure in the world he thought could unify Gordon and Duck was now sitting around in some shed on the mainland. A waste, indeed.

Thursday morning. Thomas was able to raise steam, but rolling even so far down the line as Knapford — light engine — *hurt*. Despite his crew oiling him carefully before departure, he was soon so sore that it turned almost to numbness, and it took him a full minute after he'd come to a complete stop to realise that Driver had set his brakes.

He stared blankly at the day's consist — down to a mere seven coaches, a real blessing. And yet he couldn't even fathom breaking it in halves and shunting it to the platform. He felt he weighed about

eight hundred ton, himself.

The replica rolled into the yard, straight for him. She stopped, and stared. For quite a long moment.

He *let* her. He felt her eyes roving the soot on his tanks and front and the blackness of his exhaust, and he couldn't do anything but let her. Surely she would finish this humiliating scrutiny by marching straight over to the Fat Controller with a declaration that she was taking over the whole job, she would do the thing *properly* — and he couldn't even be cross about it. It was what it —

"Tell Duck we've got it covered."

"What?"

She gave him a last, barest sweep of her eyes even as she puffed back into motion. "Duck was good enough to offer to help my line with our market trains today. But it turns out we can handle it. Be sure to pass on the message, there's no reason he need make an extra journey."

"Right," Thomas mumbled. She was already moving on.

He managed to shunt half the train to the platform himself. Duck wound up taking the other half. When it came time to leave, it wasn't so very hard, for the two of them to get so reasonable a train moving. But it *was* a struggle to build up speed, and the usual bus eclipsed them before the railway and road diverged.

They found their rhythm again, once they had sailed over the crest of Gordon's hill. Thomas finally built up some reserves of steam. Duck

seemed quite spry when he left at midday — a slightly more solid ghost of his old brisk self. Even with Emily's invitation withdrawn, he found something to do, somehow.

Thomas slept for hours, and when he awoke Duck had been held up on whatever delivery he was making. Donald attached his fitted goods to the back of the shortened Nor'wester and (all agreeing to say nothing to any inspectors) he and Thomas were off. It was as heavy a train as the Express had been originally, when they'd first inherited it from Gordon. At some point during that journey Thomas thought he'd passed on. Was he bound for the place above, or…?

Vicarstown. Donald had to take the goods on further, and Neville had been held up all day on the mainland. "Hope he's all right," Thomas muttered, eyes still closed. His only reaction. He vaguely muttered something about diesels. Stationmaster held out hope but with less than a half an hour to go they had to resign themselves. Rosie was warned to finish shunting a big goods three hours ahead of schedule and to report in time to pilot the Express, and for a moment it really seemed like she would burst into tears. She bit her lip, steadied herself, organised what she could. The sounds of her trucks' jeers and cackles jerked Thomas out of his deep sleep. The two engines backed onto the train a minute late. It was twelve minutes more before they managed to get it off and away.

Dim scenes from the line flashed in and out of Thomas's consciousness as they puffed on. He was pounding the rails as hard as he could, anxious to lose no further time. Rosie helped, but she also wailed at him at times to "watch out!" Thomas was clumsy with weariness; his wheels sometimes slipped before he jerked awake and found his rhythm again. Rosie was invaluable in keeping the train steady during these slippery moments.

He returned the favour by building up a head of steam and pushing them to an almost-Nevillean gallop ahead of Cronk. The speed allowed them to get halfway up Gordon's hill before they really struggled against the drag of the coaches, and by the standards of his and Rosie's unaided effort, that was as good as it got.

Oliver was at Wellsworth, thankfully, to give the two exhausted tank engines a push to start before running back round to his own little train. Next thing Thomas knew, shifting out of what seemed a deep nap, they were at the big station. Passengers were de-boarding with the usual mutters of discontent, resigned, none too heated. Rosie, nearly out of water, scurried off the train and ran on vapour fumes to the tower. Thomas eyed the clock out of reflex, but could not actually parse it. Sir Topham Hatt appeared on the platform like a figure from a dream. "Well done."

"I think we're ‘specially late, sir?" Thomas yawned despite himself. The station was very spinny. "I *am* sorry… we did the best we could, without Neville."

"You brought it in. That's enough."

"Is he all right, sir? The diesels…"

But perhaps he only thought he'd asked. He couldn't remember getting an answer. The next thing he knew, some odd squeaking mice-like sound had woken him. He was chuffing towards the turntable, and he fell asleep for the night by the time he was turned ‘round.

He sleepwalked back into his berth. Sleep-squeaked, rather. A dirty, squeaking, smudged-face engine, sagging on his frames with exhaustion. He'd forgotten to cheek off Gordon, grand and alone in his own lonely berth, or even to spare him a word.

Gordon watched, granite-faced, as the last chuff of steam leaked from Thomas's cylinders into the air. He was still granite as he eyed Thomas's crew, disembarking from the footplate. The fireman began to work on wheels and axles. The driver went along the running board

with a long-bristled cleaning brush. But, before anything else, he took out a cleaning rag and wiped the soot off the front of his engine's smokebox.

Gordon was not so perfectly impassive when the Fat Controller and his assistant were next to emerge from Thomas's cab. His enormous eyes narrowed and followed his controller's every move with the minute attention of a predator. The Fat Controller conferred for a couple of moments with the driver, and he himself made an inspection within the tank engine's smokebox. He did so with an air of competence that reminded everyone that he was an engineer by training, but the driver's jaw still clenched at Sir Topham's verdict.

The conversation was then clearly over, even though the Fat Controller and his assistant did not yet leave. Sir Topham was an active, energetic man, but it was natural enough, that he refrained from stomping across uneven and weedy ballast amid the shadowy dusk, in favour of waiting to employ the next engine who returned to the sheds in giving them a lift to his office. It was natural enough, that he wait in an unhurried, thoughtful stance, hands folded behind his back.

"He's pulling himself into pieces," Gordon growled behind him.

Sir Topham neither startled nor shifted to look at him. "It's too much for him," he agreed, quite easily.

As if this were some academic discussion.

Gordon's boiler might have been empty for twelve days now. Somehow it still began to run very hot indeed. "This is what teaching me a lesson is worth to you, then? You are willing to run that tank engine into the ground? To punish me for the crime of daring to speak up to you."

At this, the Fat Controller shifted every so slightly to the left. Enough to eye Gordon over his shoulder, his top-hatted profile dark against the dying crimson daylight.

"My dear Gordon," he said, very firmly, "you may have your train back any time you choose."

There was a long pause, with only the rough scraping and clinking and sloshing sounds of the crew cleaning Thomas on the far side of the shed.

Gordon did not want to be drawn into breaking that silence. He was not a stupid engine and he knew in his boiler tubes what that would mean in the end.

But the Fat Controller got the better of him. He couldn't help it. He was furious. If he had been in steam, he would have been shaking. He would have been *popping off*.

Since he wasn't — since he had instead spent a fortnight cooling off — he only rumbled, "If I withdraw my objection to the pannier tank's return?"

"You may have all the *objections* you like. But active interference? No, Gordon, I won't have it. You will fulfill your duties whether my decisions please you or no, or there is no room for you on this railway."

Gordon sneered. "Without me there *is* no railway."

"That's as may be," said the Fat Controller curtly.

As if it scarcely mattered to him.

Why should it? He was human. His life's work and his home were separate things.

"That is *as is!*" Gordon's face twisted into a snarl. "You cannot hope to continue without a reliable Express and there is no possibility at all that you are running it to time without me!"

"Not quite to time, no. Albeit not for lack of trying on Thomas' part."

"I'm sure," spat Gordon, venom in every hiss, "and that's fine by you, is it? That tank engine will pull out his undercarriage sooner or later, or burst his boiler, or — " (It hurt to say it, it hurt beyond belief. And yet it hurt no less to keep it in.) " — or throw up a siderod!"

"Well, a broken crankpin for an engine like Thomas is a fairly simple repair," mused the Fat Controller. "The siderod would puncture the water tank, but a skilled welder would set that right. In any case, we acquired a decent supply of spare parts off the other E2s, when B.R. withdrew them."

Gordon's fury was *skyrocketing*.

"So you MIGHT repair *him*," he observed, a fault in his rumble of a voice.

"I might or I mightn't," the Fat Controller agreed. "Depending on whether it were financially viable."

He looked over his shoulder at Gordon once more, very still, very grave. Behind him what little light was left in the sky was blood red.

The truth was that moment formed the first hairline fracture in Gordon's belief in himself. For he had told himself (and anyone who would listen), for many years now, that Sir Topham had proved cold-blooded and faithless and dangerous.

It was not until Sir Topham's eyes held steady like *this* that Gordon realised he'd been wrong.

He saw what such a thing looked like, now.

The great engine's eyes traveled, very slowly, from the Fat Controller – to Thomas — and back again.

"You would," he croaked. "You really would."

"Let us refrain from clutching our pearls. The fact is that *you* have left me with little other choice — "

"You could run that damned replica instead of him! You are doing this on purpose."

Sir Topham gave the smallest half-shrug.

It was a remarkably simple gesture, from a man whose pomp and expressive self-importance had always been what his grandest engine had most appreciated in him.

"You *ARE*," hissed Gordon... even as the rails sank beneath him. "She is new, and he is old and easily replaced. You've done it before! And once more I am *powerless* to stop you, powerless to do anything but see — night after night after night — and *OH*, it matters *nothing* to you! You have his replacement on hand already, after all, that little — waddling Westerner!"

The Fat Controller was shaking his head. "You understand nothing at all."

"I see you," the great engine growled. "You may win over the others with token gestures and blandishment. *I see you*. That little tank engine would run his wheels off for you — and you would let him, simply to *spite* me. He is a depreciated asset, after all, and from which you had better wring all possible use before replacing!"

The Fat Controller was shaking his head. "Do you really think that any of you are replaceable?"

"You had no compunction about replacing Edward."

It really wasn't — fair, the look that Sir Topham regaled him with.

For a moment, in the shadows, he looked… irritated?

Ironic, at least.

It hardly seemed *possible*.

Gordon was distracted from his indignant confusion by the Fat Controller reaching deep inside the pocket of his waistcoat.

In the end he held out two small model engines in his palm. One painted all in green, one painted all in blue.

"Oh, I have one for each of you," said the Fat Controller, in answer to the question that sat on Gordon's face. "They're useful when working out new timetables, you see. My father re-painted these, and some others, a long time ago — once I had outgrown such crude toys. He then re-used them on the table with the railway map in his office, all those years... I have, too, and have added to the set.

"Of course, I no longer need these two. Yet I can't dispose of them, either. No more than I disposed of Duck's, when he — when I sent him away. As for these… I've had them on me for weeks now. I expect I will a long while. No, Gordon, I don't think it's exactly possible to replace Edward. Nor Henry, whom I think you've quite forgotten. Perhaps I am mistaken, at the last," he added, mildly, as if the look that had crossed Gordon's face in that moment had been nothing very serious, nothing very shocking. "No, you had not forgotten him, after all. But listen well. You are not the only one with regrets."

"I ought to have refused my duties the moment you brought that replica here," Gordon muttered.

"Wrong!" The Fat Controller held up a finger — one finger, that's all — as if Gordon had been about to start before his guard's whistle and needed a timely reminder to wait. "No, you have drawn entirely the

wrong conclusion! It is not your place to refuse your duties. And purchasing Emily was not among my mistakes, either. I *could not* have Edward repaired — "

"You ran him into the ground for YEARS before he gave out!"

"And if you think it gladdened my heart to do so, you're a greater fool than I took you for!" the controller retorted. "You are not the only one around here who feels things, Gordon."

The boom of Sir Topham's voice filled the shed. All the men around Thomas paused, unable for the moment to pretend not to hear. Even the exhausted tank engine clanked in a confused sort of way in his sleep.

When the echo of it died, the controller's eyes were still fixed upward on on his engine. He had turned fully round, he had been pointing with some vehemence, and his eyes blazed.

Still his voice was softer, when next he spoke.

"I was wrong to leave him here for so long, in that wretched state. I avoided him, but you could not avoid it, you had to face the situation again every night — troubling your peace, during your well-earned rest. That, I am sorry I inflicted on you. On all of you."

For all Gordon's self-righteous pride, his engine nature made it embarrassing to hear his controller admit fault in anything. He looked away.

"I wasn't prepared to accept certain realities," Sir Topham continued,

now putting the toy models away. "I substituted vague hopes for a plan, and everything has suffered for it. Even some of my engines have faced the facts, before I did; I cannot do less. Our railway is poor — very poor. It cannot sustain everyone that currently works it for the rest of my life, much less beyond it. Dreadful to accept, and yet — I must begin to make decisions based on the world we are actually living in, and not the one I wish we were."

It was with wary suspicion that Gordon watched Sir Topham finish dropping the toys inside his waistcoat and smooth it down again. Gordon had heard the others talking in the sheds about the Red Engine's mad, fanciful claims that he originated in another world where Sodor looked very different. He had not thought the Fat Controller had heard that tattle. Indeed it still was not clear to him whether the man had, or whether his words were mere coincidence. Humans often made idle, fanciful turns of phrase, under no engine's influence at all.

Ultimately, it didn't matter. "That is your business. Mine is to look out for we engines."

"To look out for them, yes; by all means. Including Duck."

"I don't care," said Gordon bitterly. "Bring in a dozen Ducks — "

"I wish!"

" — but leave that little tank engine out of it. I shall pull your trains, if only to ensure you don't kill him."

"Apologise to Duck, then," said Sir Topham briskly.

"Apologise!"

"Yes; apologise, welcome him back, and we'll say no more about it."

"I have NOTHING to apologise for!" the great engine roared.

"Gordon." There was a mild, familiar exasperation (a second cousin almost to fondness) in the Fat Controller's voice.

"That would — that would be nothing but — that would be nothing but bending the knee to you!"

"You're not wrong." Said with a sort of implicit praise, as if Gordon were being especially bright. "I think I'm owed an apology, at that. I would settle, however, for you making it clear to the rest that you no longer presume to run this railway."

"I *presume* nothing! But I am intact and in steam after all these years, after engines as good as I have gone to torch, and I did not survive without fighting for it!"

"Fighting for it, indeed. That is absurd."

"Steam is dead." There was a harsh, twisted choke in Gordon's voice. "Steam is dead, you tried to hide it from us but I run to the junction every day, I know, I hear it all and I can see that it is true. They cut us up by the *thousands*."

"Oh, that is so. But calm yourself, do not carry the weight of all the

world on your boiler. You did not fight harder or run better or act more wisely than they. You are alive only because you are on Sodor."

"And you are too poor to dieselise," said Gordon bitterly.

"I do not think the character of our island is ever to chase fashion. Anyway, this railway lives or dies with you, Gordon." Sir Topham's voice was bald. It wasn't concession, nor flattery; it was a statement of fact. "So long as it lasts... you will *always* have a home here."

For an instant, in the deep shadows, Gordon looked… pale. Taut.

Almost small.

"But it may fail," he rumbled, at length. "You have become resigned to the prospect, this past fortnight… and that makes it all the more likely. The railway may well fail."

"It may," the Fat Controller allowed. "But if it fails, it is my responsibility. So from here forward I must manage as I see fit, and not ignore my better judgment in favor of wishful thinking — nor in favor of *your* fine feelings. To defer to you isn't fair to the others who work this railway. It isn't fair to me. It is not even fair to you."

Silence fell over their half of the sheds. The rustling of Thomas's crew. The crows and caws of descending bird flocks. At length, a deep-toned whistle.

The Fat Controller checked his watch. "That will be Douglas." He looked up sideways a last time at Gordon. "Tomorrow, then. You know what I will ask you."

Gordon gave no indication as to what he would answer. "Or you'll run that little engine yet again — to find out if tomorrow is the day he bursts."

"Just so."

The coolness of Sir Topham's voice would have taken the breath away from any lesser engine. Gordon being Gordon, he growled. "You have his replacement on hand already, after all. Freshly-painted and all!"

"Replacement? Perish the thought. I am determined I shall have *both*."

Douglas's headlamp indeed grew larger amid the dark.

The Fat Controller hailed them, and after Douglas had been turned round he set off again with the men towards the Big Station.

*

Eventually Gordon seemed to fade into inky blackness, too. Even the arrival of other engines — both the Twins, and Duck, one trickling in well after another (all steering well clear, of Gordon's side of the shed) did not appear to cause one ripple on his cold, unyielding surface.

The massive engine only stared into the darkness for a very long time. All the while, his face bore the hard, fixed, mineral-carved lines of an engine who has never in his long and laboured life backed off.

Nor backed down.

Chapter End Notes

I have been sitting on the idea of IASL Duck's arc since 2021. This also means that I've managed to keep my lips zipped about BLUE! DUCK! since **2021**. That's four years nearly bursting with it.

I think I deserve a medal. I coulda been a spymaster.

Shoutout to Jesse, who inspired the idea. I think I saw his very cool blue Duck first on tumblr years ago and it never left my brain. It's the way he looks so uncomfortable in it… □ Absolutely perfect expression.

Hope everyone enjoyed and tune in next time for Chapter 11: ***Gordon (Face Off)***!

Chapter 11: Gordon (Face Off)

Chapter Notes

quietly bumps the chapter count up to 13

More art for our gallery! Cheers to MozaWesterburg for this fabulous interpretation of the Ch 10 scene where Oliver triggers an important flashback for Thomas. Yes, she drew four different engines for her first TTTE fanart. Wasting no time. HiTtin' it outta the park.

A big thanks to AngrySkarloey for beta reading this.

Optional mood music.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

11: Gordon (Face Off)

The evening before Duck returns to Tidmouth

Emily had never seen the Fat Controller so angry. Oh, she'd heard *him shout before, but she had never seen him* look *as blazing and furious as he was, the night a pink-faced Douglas returned to the Big Station with the express — and without Thomas.*

Ordinarily congratulations would have been in order: bringing in such a train alone was no small feat for an engine of Douglas's size. But one glance at Sir Topham Hatt's face was enough for Emily to demurely refrain.

"Ahm sorry, sirr." Douglas was nervous and puffed-out, but defiant.

"Douglas, can you remind me, please, what happened to the last engine

who tried to countermand my orders?"

"But he needed the relief, sirr, the wee tank engine was barely conscious!"

"He'll have all the relief he needs, when this is OVER. A glorious looked-for day that you have now pushed back by at LEAST two trains!" Sir Topham pointed wildly. "Tonight was the most promising opportunity I had, you — you fool of a engine! Duck returns in the morning — "

Douglas brightened, despite all. "Duck returns?"

*" — and his presence will only harden Gordon's res—" The Fat Controller cut himself off. This was lucky, as Emily had actually been aching with the temptation to remind him that he should no more air the railway's laundry before the Knapford public than Thomas ought. The man made an instinct sound instead, a muffled curse, and then, still almost shaky with anger: "Go. **Go**."*

Not needing to be told twice, Douglas went.

Emily, due for boarding, could not seek shelter. The Fat Controller paced the platform, in a world of his own despite all the commotion around him, frowning his face into many lines, and waving off his assistant.

When he did at last realise Emily had been watching from the corner of his eye, he had calmed considerably. Emily was relieved, for an instant — it was no reassuring thing, to see the Fat Controller so angry at anyone, much less given that she sympathised with Douglas, really. But once his fury had receded it left him looking almost sad, and certainly rather old.

"You understand why?"

He spoke tersely, but Emily was no longer afraid.

"Yes, sir, I do. I'm sorry I badgered you about that train. I understand, now."

He sighed, an act that seemed to deflate him from the shoulders. "I should have liked it to all be settled, by tomorrow…"

"It will be all right, sir," she said anxiously. She had no idea what Gordon's strike had to do with the fallout from her own old foolishness, but she had to hold fast to a belief that she could make any difference at all to her home. "I've been rehearsing!"

His smile did not reach his eyes. "There's a good engine," he said absently… unconvinced.

*

The morning after Gordon breaks his silence

Duck woke early that morning, which didn't make sense. He was good and tired. As hard as the intervening years had been in other ways, he had not really put in a full day's work in a long time. His parts were all becoming re-acquainted with each other. He only came to now once his boiler began to hiss, whereupon he would wake slowly, feeling various aches.

Added to that, despite his tiredness, he didn't often fall asleep easily at nights.

Thus, it was rather odd that he woke so early. He kept his eyes closed. But the shed was still rather quiet despite some human puttering-about and the engines' crackling fires.

He was tempted to have a peek, but he refrained for a long time. Something had woken him, and he guessed what it was even if he had no desire to confirm it and risk giving away his consciousness of Donald's stare.

Duck had felt the weight of that stare no few times now, since returning from Crovan's Gate. It was always there, threatening to sear him. Duck did not look it face on. He hated himself for his cowardice but he did not face it.

Oh, some of the others shot him puzzled, concerned looks too. He couldn't stand those looks. He'd known he'd not be able to take them, it was the reason why he hadn't wanted to return to the North Western to begin with — or at least one reason. Back at the scrapyard he'd seen Henry and Edward and even the CME giving him those looks, and he'd known that to go back to Sodor was to endure a million more.

(And yet, he'd thought that those looks would be mixed with more… horror… and disgust…)

Then again, the ranks of engines to give him those looks proved to have somewhat thinned out. Some engines were gone. Others, like Gordon, didn't care. Others, like Douglas and Toby and Emily, were very discreet — Duck was too numb to feel gratitude but they did rise in his estimation when their bemusement with him was so easy to ignore. (Toby and Douglas had never been *low* in Duck's estimation,

but Emily had once been. That had been back when Duck still had hopes and fears. He really wasn't fussed, now.) Thomas gave him those looks, but he was busy with his heavy new timetable and his self-preoccupation spared Duck a lot. Then there were, by Sodor standards, a great many newer engines — Oliver and Rosie and Neville — who did not pay his behavior any mind; Duck approved of this, too.

Then there was Donald.

His focus on Duck was intent. To Duck's rather raw and dull sensibilities, it was perhaps even intense. They had always got on well, and, unlike his brother struggling to hold his own in his eternal battle with the trucks and vans, Donald did not have much to distract him from his friend's return.

He had stared in undisguised bafflement when Duck had returned from the works in blue ("What in the Rangers excursion hell, lad? Do they nae langer keep green in stock?") Duck's response had been extremely concise and uninteresting, and Donald had dropped the matter, but he had still more than once started a joke and looked to Duck expecting him to pick up the coupling, or said something to provoke the Great Western engine into response.

Duck had ignored all this.

He had no humour left in him. The tank was dry, and Donald's attempts to reconnect on the level of their old banter simply seemed… irrelevant.

Anyway, Donald ought to despise him.

He ought to despise him.

It should have been a relief that, somehow, the others had so easily forgiven him his stint of disgusting scrapyard work. It should have been a relief — but Duck couldn't understand *how* they could so easily overlook it. Perhaps he'd had dim hopes that they'd forgive him eventually. But for no one — not even Donald and Douglas — to shout at him even once? It left him as bemused with the lot of them as they appeared to be with him. A double-reinforced pane of plexiglass, through which no useful communication could hope to pass.

He couldn't believe that he was still here at all. He'd come back expecting a confrontation with the Fat Controller… but he'd had no chance. Instead the Fat Controller had put him directly to work. Duck could not argue about that, and he'd been willing enough, to go along with things. Going along with things was something of his new specialty. He'd carried out worse orders, than double-heading an express.

(Albeit some still-very-Great-Western part of Duck's mind *had* lit up with flashing emergency lights at such a bizarre departure from standard practice. It wasn't what either he or Thomas had been built for…!)

Anyway, he'd put his buffers to it and after having put in such a poor show Duck hardly expected to be asked to do anything more. Surely he wasn't in so much better condition than Henry that it was worth it for the Fat Controller to persist in this face-off with Gordon… yet Duck had found himself not only sent to the Works, but seen to there very carefully. Turned out in the best condition he'd been in since he'd left the island. Found himself *repainted*.

He'd thought that returning to the Big Station in the railway's traditional blue would finally push the Fat Controller, Gordon, or both into declaring that this had gone too far.

That hadn’t happened at all. Gordon’s eyes had bulged in a satisfyingly apoplectic way but he’d not broken his fortnight-long silence. The Fat Controller had looked surprised but *pleased*. Told him he looked well, which Duck suspected was a white lie, but his warmth had been real.

Well, it had been genuine.

None of this was real.

Surely, none of this was real.

He kept his eyes shut for another hour, pretending to still be asleep.

Donald probably knew him too well to be fooled. But Duck didn’t feel bad. He didn’t care about anything, except for Donald to finally get on out to his early Local, which at last he did — the first to depart for the day.

It was another hour before all boilers were hissing, and the Fat Controller arrived.

*

The railway's lawyer had advised the 'open meeting.' "Clear the air," she had said, and Sir Topham seemed acquiescent. It was only when she had further advised that Emily be present, and make a statement, that the controller had balked.

"I am not hiding behind my engine."

"It's all right, sir," Emily had ventured to interject. "I want to help make it right."

The lawyer had smiled at Sir Topham, even as he frowned Emily a mild warning to stay out of it. "See? She's perfect. They can't be cross with her.*"*

"It looks cowardly."

"It gives a human touch to the thing. So to speak."

"I will do the speaking," declared the Fat Controller. "It's enough that she's there, in case of questions."

Emily was relieved that he was not angry. But taking questions was rather worse than having to prepare a statement.

In the end, the two humans (with no further input from Emily) had negotiated it down to Emily speaking only briefly at the end of Sir Topham's statement. It meant that none of the parties were perfectly satisfied with their plan… Emily included. It had been one thing to offer when it was all theoretical. But to actually roll under Knapford station that night, with a rostrum set up and a crowd of some fifty people staying on the platform, waiting grim-faced to hear what the railway had to say for itself, was quite a different prospect. Yes — thirty, forty, fifty — and before the 'open meeting' began a good dozen more swelled the ranks. The Fat Controller blanched, however briefly, when he came out to see them all assembled. The lawyer had pitched the open meeting as a way to 'test the waters' (she did like her elemental metaphors), see what degree of grievance they were dealing with. This was beyond the high end of their estimation. And, in the back of the crowd, arms folded, stood one of the shadowy, indistinguishable men in sombre collar and hat whom the engines

referred to among themselves as Clone Directors. "Never mind, Emily," the Fat Controller had murmured to her, right before mounting the rostrum, austere but not cross. "When it's your turn, just speak to them quite naturally."

That was half the problem, considering that the lawyer had written Emily's brief remarks for her, and had made Emily rehearse them with her five times. Five times turned out not to be enough; her boiler water flip-flopped uncomfortably. After Sir Topham, she addressed the stony-faced crowd with painful awkwardness — wanting to tell the thing her own way, as she was absolutely sure it would make the better sense, but dutifully struggling to remember the little script on which the railway lawyer had drilled her. It should have been nice if the night had obscured everyone's faces but the lights had been turned on for this little event and she recognised a good many people. She was not sure she could have got through the sudden and uncharacteristic stage fright… had she not caught the gaze of crow-eyed Mrs. Kyndley, looking quite serious, but giving her an encouraging little smile, all the same.

*

It was only at Sir Topham Hatt's booming greeting that Thomas, his fire crackling yet still a-snore, squinted his eyes open with a confused little fweep of his whistle. The others noticed, and it made their own chorus of good morning rather half-hearted.

It was best not to… not to think too hard, about Thomas's visibly worsening condition.

The Fat Controller, brisk and businesslike, appeared to take no notice. "Donald left on time…? Good, good… Well, everyone, it's going to be a hot one. Now, let's see… " He consulted his clipboard and issued a couple of entirely expected orders, quite to Oliver's and Douglas's timetables, before appearing to be reminded of Gordon's existence by a lucky fall of the eyes. "Ah! Well now, Gordon, before I proceed, is there anything you care to say?"

There was a slight difference in the emphasis of this question, relative to all the other mornings he had asked, so everyone's eyes looked at Gordon with some fresh curiosity.

And yet nothing but silent and lordly granite loomed over them.

After a count of seven, the Fat Controller shrugged. "Well, Thomas, I will again have you and — "

"Oh very **WELL**!"

Everyone blinked. A fireman slipped mid-attempt to mount the ladder to Oliver's footplate.

Even sleep-foggy Thomas only needed two seconds to react with a stage whisper. "*He speaks!*"

Every engine then in steam hissed the tank engine quiet. If anything disturbed this moment…

The Fat Controller wore an expression of perfect unsurprised equanimity. He gestured to Duck, and spoke lightly. "Well, Gordon?"

Gordon's eyes were blazing black fire. Duck stared calmly into the bigger engine's granite face, understanding very well that Gordon still thought himself perfectly in the right, still thought that he alone chuffed the path of righteousness and self-sacrifice. Whatever he said now, he said it only to get his job back.

And Duck would be made to pay for this humiliation down the line.

"Montague," said Gordon... stiff as signal-arms. "I cannot apologize for having done what I thought right — no more," he added pointedly, for the Fat Controller's benefit, "than I can expect an apology from you, when you had done what you thought right. However, I would like to... Welcome you back. And. I hope. We can... Make a fresh start between us. Going… forward."

Oh, he was going to have to pay so, so, so very much.

"Certainly, Gordon," said Duck... a shade too sweetly. "I shan't hold an honest mistake against a colleague. But do call me Duck, old chap. All my friends do."

The Fat Controller, tugging on his lapels, now turned to Gordon expectantly. It was clear that he thought this was all going very well.

Behind him, Thomas looked like he was going to crack his smokebox in half from the sheer effort of keeping a straight face.

"Duck," said Gordon, after a long pause... said Gordon, in exactly the tone of a hunter. Spotting, in fact, a duck. During duck season. "Yes... Of course."

"Splendid," said the Fat Controller. "I am very proud to have the both of you as my engines. Duck, as a token of good will, go on out and bring Gordon's coaches to his platform, please. Then you may see Stationmaster about a slow goods. Gordon, the passengers will have very high expectations when they see you've returned. I trust you will show them today the ride that they have been missing. Thomas, apart

from Gordon's first train, you'll be back to the rest of the day's shunting. You have done marvellous work this week and have certainly earned a spell of light duty. Everyone else, you know your jobs. Let's make an orderly and peaceful day of it, shall we?"

The Fat Controller did not appear to notice, but every engine was very aware that two of their number refrained from the dutiful chorus of *yes, sir*.

For his part, Duck was numb. More numb than before, somehow. It was over. The whole affair was somehow — *miraculously* — over.

Oh, Gordon would cause some fresh trouble, down the line. You could see him steaming, despite that his fireman had only just hastily begun work. Yet already Gordon sizzled. There would come a blow-up for the ages, no doubt.

But for now, at least, the great engine had been put in his place. For now, at least, Duck was on a real railway again. With no horrors to brace himself against, no agonising dread to endure... no greater suspense than finding out what sort of goods train he was to take out that morning.

Maybe this *was* real. Maybe it wouldn't vanish, with a single turn of his wheels.

He didn't deserve the relief. And yet… for this one day, he was going to leave all his guilt and regrets by the lineside.

He going to *enjoy* the day.

*

Rouge-cheeked Mrs. Kyndley stood up, immediately after Emily finished her few brief, rehearsed sentences. Although she gave the engine a friendly nod, it was to the Fat Controller she turned.

"And so the funds Emily raised, they are still available?"

"Emily's young helper is the last known to have held them," answered the Fat Controller. "You can appreciate that I have no wish to expose her identity until she has been located and we have had a chance to speak with her. In the meantime I am fully prepared to make good on requests for refunds."

"Sir Topham," said Mrs. Kyndley, voice raised high and distinct, "I for one, and I know many others here, would much rather see the money put to good use. It's why we gave. What can yet be done?"

The man and the woman gazed at each other for a longer moment than Emily expected. Later she was to learn, from Toby and Stationmaster, that Mrs. Kyndley had hosted Sir Topham's children, when they had been evacuated during the war. Perhaps it explained why Mrs. Kyndley's voice had a trace of familiarity and reproach — and why the Fat Controller did not bristle at it. Instead he slowly lowered the fistful of reimbursement request forms that he had been brandishing.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Kyndley," he said quietly, after the moment — using the one phrase that the lawyer had charged him not to. "The cost to restore Edward was well beyond everyone's contributions."

There was a fresh murmur, and another person or two stepped forward to make their own remarks. But, notably, Mrs. Kyndley did not retreat from her position at the front of the crowd.

"Maybe," growled a fresh voice — and Emily shrank, to see the tall, hatchet-faced man it was attached to. Her arrival to the Ffarquhar line had been a net gain for the railway. They retained nearly all their old passengers, with whom Emily was generally on quite good terms, and — fresh, new, and notably and audibly in better repair — she had won back a good few from the bus company, as well. But this old man's was a profile Emily had not seen in a long time… one of those vanishingly few who had quit travelling by train in disgust, the first week he'd laid eyes on her. "... maybe if yeh'd told us what was needed, it could have been found!"

The murmur of the crowd grew louder, very quickly and very sharply.

"It is not the custom, sir, in Dryaw," agreed Mother Millie Miller (of Dryaw Mill), "to let old friends fall to ruin!"

"And Edward was *an old friend," chimed in young Pete Tillis… already an cattle-agent of seven years' experience before he was twenty-five. "He was my dad's friend, and my grandmum's before that, and he was practically the only one left who could remember poor old Aunt Lou — "*

*

Gordon, once he was up to steam (and polished, too, from funnel to firebox), looked every bit an engine who had no thought of himself enjoying that day.

Neither himself nor anyone else, indeed. He sailed forth from the shed amid vast plumes of smoke and steam like a dragon emerging from its lair. His journey to the Big Station was unhurried, kingly, deliberate.

Then, three things happened.

The first was that Gordon found his way blocked, when he went to top off with fresh water and coal, by a low emerald-green tender. Its presence was so unexpected that he nearly ploughed right into it.

And that might have nicked his front. So he stopped short, of course, with a jolt, and an angry hiss of steam.

"Get. a move. on."

"No," said the replica, voice high and clear, "not till I'm ready." Her fireman was only now climbing up to drop the bag to her water tank. He gave Gordon a passing glance, but seemed more concerned with double-checking that Emily and driver were well and prepared to stay put.

It seemed they were. Gordon stared in a sort of angry red mist of disbelief. The replica had never dared put herself in his way since her first month here, had treated this water column as radioactive and off-limits, and even carefully timed her visits to Knapford's one coaling stage well around anyone else's schedule — especially his. It took a solid two minutes before Gordon was even sure what he was seeing.

"I have returned," he rumbled. "Do not delay me at this time again."

"You're a big strong engine, Gordon, I'm sure you can understand the concept of a 'queue'," she sniffed. "I will be here whenever I need, and if you don't like it — well. *You may speak to the Fat Controller about it.*"

Gordon blew off steam in an unbroken angry hiss till she had finished.

"Sir Topham Hatt to you," he growled after her, when at last she puffed away.

She snorted. "As soon to me as to you…"

The Gordon from the beginning of this mad month should have popped a valve. *This* Gordon was quieter — but the glinting fury in his narrowed eyes was no less dangerous than before. A particularly keen-eyed inspector should have raised more alarm at the sight of this half-mad engine muttering soundless execrations to himself, off and on, than at the mixed train Thomas had headed out of Knapford, only last night. Once Gordon had finished his own watering and chuffed off in the direction of the Big Station his over-bright eyes swept the yard like a hawk, hunting prey.

But he was hunted first.

Donald chuffed up from apparent nowhere, so wrapped up had Gordon been in his own stew of thought. He did not realise the Caledonian at all until they bumped buffers.

Hard. Donald glared at him from behind an exhale of steam from his nostrils.

"Duck's oot on the line — ye get me, instead," Donald hissed. Startling the bigger engine, who was so in the habit of regarding either Caledonian as utterly beneath notice. "Now ye listen, and listen well. Dinna ye *dare*. Och aye," he snapped, as Gordon took a moment to survey his position (a long row of Mark 1 coaches shielded them from sight of staff or help), "I see thoughts leakin' out the seam ae yer kist, ye auld flying bathtub, and Ahm tellin' ye now, ye gae on and stuff 'em all richt back ben. Tell one lie oon Duck — lay ye one buffer on

that pannier tank — ye say as much as *yin wuird* to him — and ye'll find all three ae four pieces left ae ye rustin' in tha same scrapyard as ye auld friends. Dae ye hear?"

It said a lot about the usual state of affairs on this medium railway that Gordon only blinked slowly. Donald seemed to have transformed into a seething creature of guile and menace, all sharp edges and violent fumes.

Gordon had never seen anything quite like it and all he said was (in a voice strangely devoid of his usual pomp, a flat natural voice): "... I don't lie."

"Guid for ye," Donald snarled. "Because Ahm telling ye, Ahve dealt with plenty ae liars and rats in ma time. Dae ye think I brought the baith ae us all the way here without having shunted a few bastards aside who were as strong as ye — and with twice yer brains?" (At this point Donald sneered. And Gordon did not seem to know how to react.) "Now, I held ma tongue last time, for Ahd warned Duck somethin' bad was bound to come ae his meddling atween ye all, and I had ma brother to think on. But Ahm not for hauding my wheest twice. Gae and make yin move against him, Gordon m'lad, and we'll find how many razorblades they kin make oot ae ye!"

Gordon might have been taken too off guard to properly roar Donald back into place. But you couldn't mistake him for cowed, either. His narrowed eyes indicated hard, fast thought in plenty.

"Is that all?" he asked roughly.

Perhaps it was meant as rhetorical — Gordon's mouth was still in motion — but he was then biffed from behind.

"Nae!" retorted Douglas, over the clank and hiss. (Gordon jumped. Face to face with him, Donald's eyes sparked.) "As it happens, ye'll be leavin' Ollie well enough alone, too."

"Oliver!" Gordon spluttered.

"Aye," mimicked Douglas: "*O-li-ver*."

"*We* care aboot him," said Donald. "An' he's bin turnin' *normal* again, wi ye away. Like the brave wee engine I braucht here."

"He talks ainly half sae muckle rubbish, wi'oot ye tae parrot," agreed Douglas. "Ye've had the wee engine wrapped round yer wheels fur years and he brake faith with everyone else fur yer sake. Noo he's making friends again. He's *happy*. We willnae see ye turn him toady again!"

"Keep yer funnel oot his smokebox," growled Donald, all hiss and glare, "or ye'll answer to *us*."

Gordon stared back, looking as dumbfounded and stupid as they could have wanted — for a moment.

Then he began to laugh.

It wasn't his usual deep, rumbling chuckle. It came out almost as a series of barks, rusty at first, then getting sharper, and sharper. Donald held his ground, but Douglas looked unsettled.

"I'll take you oot back-shed and ram ye again' some buffers!" Donald snarled.

But Gordon was subsiding into rumbling little aftershocks of indifferent laughter, slowly turning back to stone. "Good show," he told them, in an odd, slanted tone impossible to parse but deadly to feel, "splendid. Someone 'round here ought to have an ounce of spirit! If you want the Westerners — have them. There you go. Run along, now."

He had given in, and his voice was very dull by the end of the speech. The brothers were not bullies and there was nothing more to do at this sudden collapse of Gordonian spirit than to look at him, sideways and suspicious, and then leave him there.

Thomas, in a much deeper siding, had heard none of this. He had rattled and rolled his way into the old yard, much more squeakily than before — and then gone still. As if paralyzed by the sight. His eyes flicked for a moment with some relief towards the station canopy — at least he didn't have to prepare Gordon's train.

But here he was again. He would sort it out next time. And again. And again… forever. For the rest of his life.

He sighed, surveying the all-too-familiar sidings glumly… the semi-hostile rolling stock dourly… the familiar streetscapes behind them… almost with nausea. *Welcome home.*

A squealing of brakes and a series of loud angry beeping from the street shook him out of his sinking stupor. He gave a little leap on his wheels, eyebrows shooting up like exclamation points jumping from a page. He looked again towards the station, whence the great express engine was also chuffing… and where at least one double-decker bus was already present, just barely visible between a gap in the coaches.

Thomas swore. "Gordon! GORDON!"

He scampered off in slightly wobbly pursuit. Oh, his axles were all out of joint this morning. Lucky thing, that he wasn't on the Express today. Very lucky indeed.

"Hey, so — so — Gordon — *stop* — you need to hear this!!"

Gordon *had* eased onto his brakes, and so Thomas was already level with him once he had finished yelping. The great engine glared sideways at him, and Thomas gulped. "Okay, so, ummm — now, don't be cross — "

The lines on Gordon's face somehow deepened. Like canyons where a silly little tank engine could fall into a cold and dark abyss.

" — but, uhhhhhh, so I, I mighta kinda told the busses that you, erm, were having maintenance while you were gone." The shadow on Gordon's face… *maybe* lightened? So Thomas gulped again, but went on a shade more steadily: "And I said it was internal stuff, so they wouldn't be able to tell it was a lie just by looking at you. Imaybesaid youwere gettingyoursteamchest re-thermomatysed — "

(Well, he *had* to tell Gordon now — so that the big engine wouldn't look as gormless as *this*, when a bus asked him about it.)

"My. what?"

" — **anyway**, THE POINT IS, I *did* say all the work done on you was going to make you faster than ever. And that you'd break all your old records when you returned. Uhhhhh sorry. I'm sorry, they were just

pressing us to say where you were and I didn't see anything else I could say and — um, yeah. Like, they're probably going to make bets about your timings today? (They're really into betting.) Um. Don't — Don't kill me." Gordon still loomed above him like a guardian of hell, blotting out the sun. Thomas couldn't take more than half a minute of it. "Orokaywell *fine*, just — make it quick, then. Old times' sake and all? Just make it quick."

The suspense was awful.

"No, little Thomas." Gordon's voice rumbled in, as if, at first, from thirty miles away. But it deepened and solidified. "You did *exactly* right."

And the great engine chuffed on to the station. Thomas watched him go, fear giving way to disbelief and something like pride…

It was reassuring, to see Gordon with all the airs of a king proceeding to reclaim his throne. The rival bus took one look at him… and the laughing jeer he was in the middle of died on his grille.

*

The first run was actually a couple of minutes' slower than Gordon's typical clockwork timing. As if he still needed to shake the stiffness from his joints.

The second run was briefly interrupted by a danger signal.

The third run, however, saw Gordon come into Vicarstown a minute ahead of schedule.

And then the fourth run of the day, as written up by morning in the major Sudrian dailies:

Seven and a half minutes shaved off the timetable… meaning that N.W.R. #4 had hit ninety during the last leg, beating his own old record from 1959.

*

The Fat Controller let the crowd talk themselves out, on this point, calm and serious. For Emily it was something of an ordeal. Oh, it was not the first time she'd heard her predecessor praised — far from it — but a dedicated group session of the thing was rather trying. It would likely have been different if 'the kind little engine' had ever been kind to her — even once. But that had not been her experience. To be sure, Edward had never gone out of his way to be cruel to her, and by the standards of this railway that had been… something. It had been something. He could have so easily incited some of the others to be even worse. Instead it was generally known that he disapproved of Emily's exclusion, and it was quite possible that had put a brake on things before they'd spiralled too wildly out of section. But he had not led by example, either… had not offered any show of support. Instead he had iced her out, unwilling it seemed to so much as look at her. So far as this went, Emily could have forgiven. She would have been inclined to regard the old engine with pity rather than resentment, for he was clearly in great pain and she was fair enough to know that she had no idea how she should handle such a thing, herself. But it was in this context that words of praise for the absent engine — or, worse still, the inevitable comparisons between the new engine, eager and inexperienced and headstrong and getting into all sorts of scrapes, and her steady, sure-footed predecessor — generally hurt like an errant blowtorch. And there seemed to be no end to them. Emily presumed that long absence and grieving pity put such a shine on everyone's memories of the old engine… for surely no engine could be as gentle and as wise and as humble and as endlessly bloody perfect as that. It wasn't possible. And if he had been, surely he couldn't be remembered that fondly. At times it sounded dreadfully dull.

But at other times, her bravado slipped, and she simply felt rather small and insecure. Like that night. One person after another stepped forward to chime in with some new little memory of Edward with this driver, that fireman, on this road, or at that station, offering stolid unflagging cheer during this war, or that one. There was one after another who was a second-, third-, fourth-, even in one case fifth-generation family friend of the old engine. By the end Emily almost considered the merits of simply running past that old board at the Toryreck mines and sinking fathoms deep into the earth… what right had she ever had to roll in and sweep away all that? And yet at the same time some other part of her felt elevated, about to sprout propellers and return to her work with a good will. That's what she was working for. She wanted that. She wanted to be remembered like that. Who cared what the other engines thought of her! She knew that she had it in her, to be this, to so many.

The Fat Controller acknowledged yet another speaker's testimony, in a tone that very ably combined respect with an intention to begin to move the night's session forward.

Farmer McColl was not so resigned. "It's all settled, then, there's nothing left that anyone can do?" he demanded.

Sir Topham looked at him directly. "Yes, quite. Edward has been passed to the ownership of a dealer in Beckermet, and that was by his own wish. You are aware, of course, that he was not one to give up easily. It was past the point of hope."

These words seemed to resonate. They cast a pall over the low buzzing talk of the gathered crowd, and quieted it.

Mrs. Kyndley stepped forward once again, her own tone pitching more quiet than the previous speakers, and matching his.

"If the case were hopeless, we could have understood that. But we have

been very loyal to this railway. We deserved to know. And what's more," she went on, sadly but firmly, "you had no right, Sir Topham — no right — to steal away that engine to Bedlarmet or wherever it was like a thief in the night! Emily is a good girl, and we love her" (she gave the engine another little nod) "but we don't so easily forget, either. It wasn't right, that we had no chance to say goodbye. It's a shocking way to treat your engine — and no less your customers. You don't understand our feelings, Sir Topham. Not those of us along our line. We did not stick with Edward's train all those years because we lacked other options. And to be very frank, our loyalty is not to you, nor is it to the concept of rail generally. It is to our friends."

With every eye on him, the Fat Controller was quiet for a long moment.

"I understand."

Another silence. There was a cough in the crowd, and after another moment Sir Topham matched it with one of his own.

"I appreciate your feelings," he began, "and I want to thank you all for turning out tonight. The railway is very grateful for your — "

"Right then," shouted Pete Tillis, interrupting recklessly, "so is it too late to use the funds raised elsewhere, eh?"

The Fat Controller blinked, and stared, and fumbled to hold up the request form once more. "Th-The donations will be refunded — "

"Don't want it," said Pete, as the crowd murmured again, again building a crest of noise, split almost evenly between that's right *and* mind yer manners, son. *"We already told you. Can you apply them to whatever it is Gordon needs, then? Or is it already 'too late' for him, too?"*

*

Gordon had not yet returned from that record-setting run when Sir Topham Hatt had come out of his office to overhear Thomas give a groan as he braked too hard on his worn tyres. Apparently he had not been kidding about that having earned a good rest business. He had sent Thomas straight back to the sheds for an early night.

Thomas hadn't resisted. Of course he didn't want the Fat Controller to get too comfortable again with the idea that he, Thomas, wasn't good for anything but desultory shunting moves at the every-year-quieter big station — and maybe not even so much as that. But, on the other rail, he *was* knackered. Besides, it was rather nice to have a little fuss made over him. He'd felt *invisible* for so long…

And bricked, walled Tidmouth Shed was maybe one blessed degree cooler. Thomas backed into the shade with relief. It had been a muggy one. Not very typical weather for them, either — back when Thomas had first been made, Knapford and its environs hadn't known what humidity was.

It had been a weird day. Not just for him — it seemed like the others had felt it, too. Their great joint mission was complete, so there was nothing they need all pull together towards. And yet… you could not yet trust this new peace. It felt wrong, like after the rubble of a bombing had been cleared from the tracks. Everything ran again. A relief — but you couldn't call it normal. Trains could come and go, the skies were quiet, but you still had to pass the mounds of wreckage. An uneasy, wary, too-stretched sort of quiet. You had to run over it and back, a good many times, before you could trust that the mended track still held weight.

Duck chuffed in, not long after Thomas's crew had left for the night. Thomas hoped against hope he was feeling sociable.

The Western engine hadn't been back so early since his return, and he hesitated as he eyed the shed.

"This was Henry's spot," said Thomas, "next to me. And if one of the twins overnight here they take the middle."

The other tank engine, and his crew, seemed relieved to have the matter settled.

"Thanks," said Duck, after he'd backed into the berth. "It's changed from what I remember. Wasn't sure anyone had regular spots anymore."

"Oh, we have. They've just changed… after you left," added Thomas, surprising even himself with the sudden need to say it aloud, "Gordon always took the berth next to Edward."

"To prevent anyone else talking to him," said Duck, brow furrowing. Whatever Gordon might say about *Duck*'s "troublemaking," his actions made it clear that he knew the source of the "trouble" had been none other than Edward himself; otherwise, why limit Edward's ability to talk to the others freely even after Duck had been sent far away? There was no point in getting too surprised, of course, by Gordonian hypocrisy — much less too worked up. It was an old story.

But it was one that always seemed to have some fresh chapter.

"Right." Thomas's face darkened too. "Anyway, that caused everyone else to shift, too. I reckon it was me who bollocksed things up next. I went to sod right off clear on this side. That great twat is breathing down my funnel all day long, I'll take as much space from him as I can get the rest of the time." He paused. He wasn't yet used to this new Duck, who was so slow to speak, and who gave so little indication that

he was listening, that Thomas often found himself rambling. "Erm. How was your day, then?" he asked… in a more polite, small-talky, less-peeved way.

And Duck answered. Not with any great animation, but they had a real chat, telling each other about their day — it was the first they'd not worked together since Duck's return. Idle talk, and uninteresting… and a real comfort to overwrought tubes and axles.

"Controller insisted I come back," Duck was saying, as his men left. "I tried to tidy up your yard…"

"*My* yard," Thomas said, with emphasis. "Don't go taking it from me, Duck, s'all I have left. Anyway the Fat Controller's right, we've done enough this week!"

Duck gave a humourless little huff. "I don't think I can ever do enough."

"Rubbish."

"Is it?" Duck raised an eyebrow — for an instant, it was almost like old times. "You know, I've neglected to thank you. You are a big part of why I'm still here."

"Don't worry about it." (Though it was strange, how in just that moment there came a flash of vision: Duck, sent back to Wherever, and Henry returned to them, but with the Fat Controller as equally shaken and sharpened by the upheaval, equally prepared to restore his presence at Tidmouth… it was a vision painful and enticing, all at once. What Thomas had shouted in anger at the Big Station that night was rooted in one truth. They really were, at this point, trading one engine's life for another. There was not enough room on the life raft

for everyone, and it was as uneasy a thought as ever.) "It's… I'm glad I was able to help. But it's Henry that sent you here — "

"I know." Duck's voice was quiet and hollow. Thomas's own voice had cracked a little, on the name, and he quickly pressed on.

" — and the Fat Controller who insisted you stay."

"I — I still can't believe he kept me. I've been expecting every hour to be sent away — until this morning."

Thomas was a bit taken aback. He did, however, welcome the insight. "That's the reason you asked for blue. Isn't it."

"I honestly don't know," Duck mused. "... maybe. Could be a part of it." He coughed. "But that wasn't the main reason."

Thomas waited — for a moment.

"Sooo. Are you angry with the Great Western about something — or did you just want Gordon to burst a safety valve?"

"Oh, second one," said Duck, matter-of-factly. "I'm not very proud of it, but."

That seemed to be all the excuse he intended to come up with, and Thomas chortled. "Fair enough."

Duck spoiled the mood when he added, in a quiet musing tone not entirely drowned by Thomas's giggle, "I don't feel very Great Western, these days."

"Well," said Thomas, with an awkward sympathy — a clumsy sincerity, "you *were* on the scrap-lines all those years. All that... all that sitting ‘round and waiting for the worst makes an engine feel different, I reckon."

Duck considered him for such a long moment that Thomas supposed he had said something wrong. Social niceties weren't his strength at the best of times, and what the etiquette was when talking about scrap, he really didn't know.

"Yes," said Duck at last, slowly. "It... does."

He had drawn back, somehow. There was a new distance between them — or an old distance, rather. They had never been all that close, and it was easy enough, for Thomas to suppose that his own big mouth was the reason this tête-à-tête now cooled.

"Anyway," said Thomas, eager to push past it, "you succeeded! Gordon's eyes about popped right out of his smokebox, when you rolled into the sheds that night in your new paint. If he'd been in steam I sure you *would* have got a burst valve out of him."

"I don't know that I'd say they popped out," said Duck… voice somehow faraway and tinny, like a balloon on the air. "They were very squarely buried in me, as I recall." He hmmed, even more distantly. "You all needed him to make that apology. I oughtn't have provoked him."

Thomas scoffed. "You deserved to. If it were *me* in your brake shoes,

I'd've probably charged straight at him! 'Course," the tank engine added, with a laughing note of realism, "I'd get nowhere fast, that way. I tried to put the brakes on him once before, you know, and it was no contest."

"Mm." Duck was clearly in no mood to hear the story again.

"But don't you worry, Duck. You're safe! And if Gordon ever comes for you now, why the Fat Controller will just slap him down again. It's *me* that should be worried," and Thomas chuckled again, not altogether disguising his nervousness. "I sort of created a mess for him with the busses, you know. I owned up to him this morning, and I'm still in one piece — but for a moment there I thought he was about to flatten me into an outsize manhole cover!"

"Mmm," said Duck again. "You don't have anything to fear from Gordon."

Thomas quirked an eyebrow. "Because he's so harmless?"

"I didn't say that. But he cares for you too much."

"Rubbish."

"... is it?"

"I mean, he always wants me here, but that's just cos… he likes being waited on."

"Of course he does," conceded Duck. "But it's not just vanity. I thought that myself, before."

Thomas waited, then made a face of annoyance. You could only get so many words out of Duck at a time, these days. Out of Duck, who had once nattered on endlessly. "Before *what?* "

Duck was vaguely surprised out of his reverie. "Before today. Before he gave in to the Fat Controller. When I kept biffing him and biffing him, and he just took it."

"So what? He just wanted to get out of this shed, it's miserable being stuck here — "

"I think he rather enjoyed being miserable."

"What?" There was something wrong there, which irritated Thomas because he couldn't begin to pinpoint what it was. "And anyway, he was probably worried about how many passengers he might be losing."

"He's too proud to imagine he couldn't win them back," said Duck… still vague. So incredibly distant, which made it all the worse for Thomas to feel that the barely-there engine might be winning the argument. "Indeed, it seems he was right… No, none of those things could have moved him. He gave up his pride only because he was anxious about you. That's why Fat Controller never gave Emily the train, you know; wouldn't have worked with her, nor anyone left here — except you. He was right, of course. Gordon was too afraid to see you break."

Some massive chilly claw was tightening around Thomas's boiler.

"Yeah," he scoffed, resisting it. "Not having a station pilot in residence is his worst fear. He might nick a buffer, fetching his own coaches."

"I was already back from the Works when he gave in," Duck reminded him quietly. "There was a back-up. Anyway there was no guarantee the Fat Controller would forgive him so thoroughly as to allow him to retain your services. If that mattered so much to him, he would have tried to bargain before he capitulated." Perhaps he saw Thomas's eyes slowly widen as he stared unseeing ahead of his buffers, and thought he was offering comfort as he said, in his new flat steady way, "He was staring at you all last night. And the night before. Your firebox was clicking, and it would startle us half-awake — just like Gordon's used to — and he didn't fall back asleep at all. Didn't complain, either. Just stared. It was the first time I thought perhaps he would give in after all — "

"No." Thomas's voice was faint. "No. *No*."

There was the usual indifferent shrug in Duck's voice. "You don't have to do anything about it. I'm hardly about to tell you to be grateful or anything. It's just a fact, is all."

"He — he didn't do *that*. For *me*. Never that."

"'That' isn't such a great matter to a normal engine," observed Duck… with almost his old trace of judgmentalism. "Giving in on a point of pique and doing what his controller says, for a normal engine that's no real sacrifice."

"And Gordon's never been mistaken for a *normal* engine! No, Duck, this is — absurd. It's just — " He had no puff left. He'd been sitting still for over two hours now, hadn't pulled a train all day, and *now* his puff

threatened to fail him. "Can't be."

"His concern for you is greater than his ego," said Duck, quiet and inexorable. "And that's saying… a lot. His ego is the size of Australia."

"Yeah it is! It could *block out the sun*."

"Yes. Yet you matter to him more."

"No. NO! It's — stupid. No. God, Duck, shut up."

"What on earth's the matter?"

Thomas finally broke his gaze into middle distance to look at Duck with agony in his eyes. "Just. *NO* . Look, I know I'm not needed. I know it, all right? My siblings. They could get on and build a whole life without me there. The controllers here… they've always been kind… but they never thought I was *essential*. Never thought I could help them with anything really important — "

"Except these past two weeks," said Duck quietly. All the sudden he wished he hadn't said anything. Hadn't told Thomas that he'd been used, not because he was expected to succeed, but because he was expected to struggle… to fail. He'd been bait. Thomas's voice was breaking, and Duck saw why. He looked away.

Thomas's babbling continued throughout.

"Edward. Could just up and leave me. More than once. I needed him

but he didn't need me. Everyone here has someone else, someone more important to them. Everyone. Everyone but you and you don't really need me either, not even now, because you've stopped giving a damn. And I can live with all this, you know? Whatever! Someone has to be the least important. Someone has to be the one who counts the least, I guess it's me. I can try to live with that. I *have* lived with that. But — but the *ONE ENGINE* in this entire big world who *does* need me? Is the one who's kept me anchored here, anchored here like this station is a gaol and I've served my sentence fifty bloody years and still it's never going to *end*? **No**. Just, no. It's bad enough I'm stuck back in that yard, but I *won't* bear being trapped there when it's because I'm — when I'm — by *him!* He's ruined *everything* around here! He hurt you, he's hurt so many of us! He's, he's — he's cruel, and unreasonable, and pig-headed, and it's — it's HIM*?* HE's the one who needs me? NO! No, that's just. That's just completely, totally, utterly *ridiculous*, I'd rather just be ignored forever, I'd *rather*, and, and and and and and it just *can't.* It can't be *true*."

The fireworks ended, Thomas shaking and heaving on his tracks.

When quite sure the other tank engine had calmed himself, Duck swallowed a bit of ash.

"Maybe I'm wrong," he said quietly. Then, "After all, I've only just got back."

Dust motes drifted in the air before the emergency exit, light and soft as always. Thomas's breathing was heavy for a long time.

The dark deepened.

*

And so Emily had another block of popular testimony to endure. People had memories of Gordon, too, that went back nearly as long. Even branch line people sometimes venture off. Indeed a good few of the Ffarquhar commuters rode the Wild Nor'wester on the weekly. There was a difference in the way they spoke of Gordon, of course… even in their telling, there was not much warmth or charm in the great engine. But there was strength, and stability, a lofty graciousness, and sort of rock-ribbed foundation on whom a good many families had built livelihoods for generations. Apparently Gordon had been employed in rather different kinds of work during the war and this comprised half the memories and stories that the Ffarquhar line people told of him, constituted no small part of their respect. His absence, apparently, was like a drought. Of course they'd noticed.

"So what is it, then," asked Pete Tillis at last… after what had been to Emily an interminable outpouring of affection and regard for the great engine who had treated her like the ballast beneath his rails for all their acquaintance. She silently blessed the young man for putting an end to it. "If the bombers never took Gordon out, what has? Is *he indeed under maintenance? Or is that something else where 'arrangements' still need to be made, eh?"*

This made everyone's face turn again to the Fat Controller.

Sir Topham, however, seemed to hesitate — not as before, when he had glanced sidelong, here and there, at the lawyer. This time it was over the crowd… back to the Clone Director.

Who, indeed, had stepped forward. "We thank you all for your generous impulse. But we will always be able to take care of number four's needs."

The Clone Director had a high, reedy voice, but he made it carry. At these words the mood of the people darkened again, disconsolate at such a proclamation in that night's grim context. Mrs. Kyndley tilted her head up in a way that indicated that her name could refer to kindling. Like a fire.

But they stayed on topic, for Farmer McColl burst forward with the crowd's urgent question. "Then hang it all, where IS he?!"

"There is nothing mechanically wrong with him," replied the Clone Director, sounding positively snippy. He now stared back significantly at the Fat Controller… and at length every head followed his.

The Fat Controller mopped his brow with a sigh. "Gordon," he began, "is… taking some personal time."

"PERSONAL time?" bellowed Farmer McColl.

"Personal time," the Fat Controller repeated, in quite a normal volume. "As we have been reminiscing, he's been here for many, many years. I'm sure you can appreciate that he has a good bit of time banked."

There was fresh murmuring, the crowd breaking into three or four separate conversations. It gave good cover for Emily, who — to her own surprise — found she had some difficulty, keeping a straight face. Personal time, indeed!

It was harder not to smile, when the vicar of Elsbridge piped up, in his quavering, querulous voice. "Is this the politically correct way of saying you're disciplining him, Sir Topham? Is this how we speak of such things, these days?"

The Fat Controller ignored this, naturally enough. Mrs. Kyndley again stepped forward and intercepted the awkward point with a more direct one. "Then when does Gordon return, please?"

The Fat Controller looked at her seriously. "That depends on Gordon." Then he looked over the whole assemblage and spoke more loudly, cutting off a fresh wave of talk. "This is all I can share. Our engines have some right to privacy. However, I hear your concerns, and in future when one of the engines is in need of repairs I promise I will communicate this fact. I had not appreciated, until this incident, how very fortunate we are in our friends…"

He closed the thing up prettily. When he gets up a good head of steam, Emily thought, he's quite a good speaker. She'd never really had many chances to know.

The people were talk-weary and well spent of their frustration and curiosity, and were biddable again. Some left the station for their homes in town, others began to board Emily's train back to Ffarquhar. Mrs. Kyndley, however, lingered — not a bit intimidated by the Clone Director nor the lawyer nor the porters nor the guard.

"He's upset," she said to Sir Topham. "Isn't he?"

He looked at her gravely.

"I won't gossip," she fussed.

"Upset is a good word for it. I suppose."

"Gordon has a big heart," she insisted, almost reproving. "It's not all an echoing cavern inside that great boiler of his."

"Three weeks ago, Amelia, and I should have said of course he does." The Fat Controller gave a brief, humourless ripple of a smile. "Now I merely

hope so."

"Are you playing games with that engine, Sir Topham?" She really was reproving, now. Like the Fat Controller were some errant son-in-law.

"It's not a game, Mrs. Kyndley. It is very serious indeed."

"But you know he's grieving. You know *it! An engine* needs *work."*

(She's not choosing sides*, Emily reminded herself, staring fixedly ahead. She swallowed.* She doesn't know.)

"Whatever he's done, it's cruel to keep it from him so long — especially just now. They say that other main line engine is gone, too. Henry. He and Gordon were friends once."

"Were."

"It's all in the past, when you're burying your dead. It all hurts." He said nothing, and Emily saw nothing, and yet Mrs. Kyndley's voice softened. "Let some of us visit him. He's upset, not damaged. It will do no harm to his pride for people to come see him."

"He's in a locomotive shed, not a hospital ward."

"There are those of us who know our way around a rail yard," the woman groused. "I've stamped over many a sleeper in my day, to pay a merry little visit."

"My dear Mrs. Kyndley, you know that I cannot know about that." And yet he smiled a little, however grimly. "I assure you, Gordon will not be given up on without you having a chance to speak with him first."

"Fair deal," she said grudgingly. She seemed aware that she was putting him in an awkward position, and, indeed, perhaps she wanted to see her own bed before midnight. "You cannot say fairer. We will hold you to it."

None of this gave Emily cause to pity Gordon — not one bit. She was only curious, to wonder what such an intervention would have looked like.

But it was never needed. Gordon apologised to Duck the following week... seemingly of his own accord...

*

The Big Station, after the Nor'wester's blistering return, was full of cheers and talk. There was even a flash photographer.

But the great engine slunk off, as soon as he could, in favour of the water column. The days had lengthened considerably since his last day of work — it was not pitch-black — but it was still quite dim outside the circle of light from his headlamp. Fat plops of rain fell, here and there, like the sky could not make up its mind whether to let loose or not. (It was as well it only now began: the only thing worse than pulling a train on wet rails is doing it on intermittently wet rails.)

Here at rest, the splats of rain seemed to have no effect on Gordon, and they brought no chill to the warm night — warmer still, in the heat and steam off the Gasworks that loomed behind this portion of the yard.

Perhaps it was that stray billowing steam that obscured Gordon's thoughts from the world.

Perhaps it wasn't.

Perhaps Gordon needed no reason at all to have dodged the crowd and light and congratulations of the station behind him. Perhaps he had simply grown accustomed to solitude. Knowing he would have none overnight, perhaps he sought it now.

If it were so, he failed magnificently. Oliver puffed up on his siding, joining him.

"'Lo, Gordon," he chuffed cheerily. "Great runs today. Everyone at Suddery station was talking about how you had the Nor'wester running again as it ought. The island can't get on without you — that's just what they said. Oooh, the busses are sick over it!" A fat raindrop plopped on his nose, scattering to many smaller droplets. He chortled in un-selfconscious delight.

A muscle twitched in Gordon's lower face.

"Go over there," he grunted.

"I'm telling you, they're grumbling like a faulty ballast-tamper. Thomas and Toby told me. Apparently one of 'em ran a level crossing, when the warning bell was ringing and all? Maybe you saw it? It was all right — nothing happened — 'cept a copper caught 'em at it. They wrote a ticket. The whole company is up in semaphore-arms about it — s'a bad day to be a bus, that's for sure."

"Go over there."

"What? Don't be stupid, I'm in no rush. Anyway that water's hard. I don't want to be the next sent to the Works to be descaled. What kind of work was that Duck on today, then?" Oliver could chatter away for England, but the strangeness of Gordon having no remarks on so potent a subject struck even him. "Oi, you all right?"

Gordon took a deep breath, and then approximated a frown.

"No, I am not 'all right'," (here he inserted a pouty harrumph) "and I cannot hope to be with you scampering around underwheel." He saw that this had no effect on Oliver, and he tried again, looking his grandest... despite the trickle of rainwater running off the bridge of his nose. "Sir Topham may have compelled me to reconcile with That Troublemaker, but he said nothing about *you*. Leave me be…"

Oliver blinked, in a mild, almost Toad-ish way. "But why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

Underlit by his headlamp, Gordon looked almost suspicious. Up till today, few had stuck around to argue the point, when he ordered them off.

But Oliver seemed even more cavalier than *the replica*.

"If this is about me helping Toby shunt you to the sheds, I think you're being a bit daft, mate. I've told you I'm sorry. And now you're back at

work. It's time for you to enjoy things, and let that go."

"It's — It's beyond all that," said Gordon… sounding hoarse. "I was foolish to ever expect anything more of you to begin with. *I* am an express engine — "

"So am I." Oliver winked. "They told me so at Swindon."

" — built to conquer the East Coast Main Line, and long since having fulfilled that mission! I belong to a sphere of pioneers and stars and heroes. I ought to have never lowered myself to associate with a little nobody tank engine like *you*. I have come to my senses during my… sabbatical… and I am now resolved to turn the page on this shameless chapter."

Gordon frowned with royal grandeur but Oliver, brow furrowed, didn't seem to buy it.

"Mmmmmmm… are you, though?"

This annoyed Gordon, and he began to look much more convincing. "It is not your place to quiz me, little Westerner. Get on."

"Mmm," said Oliver again. The rain started, in earnest. Gordon's crew had finished watering him and now, each futilely covering his head with one arm, they resumed their posts on the footplate. Oliver spotted Gordon checking on him out the corner of his eye but was unperturbed. "Well, every engine's rather out of sorts when they've been in the shed for a bit."

The gentle reader will be none too surprised to hear that Gordon, king

of telling other engines what they thought and why they thought it, found it being done to him very distasteful. "What cheek! Go to the fitters, I am sure they need to fuss over you for some little thing or another."

"Ho ho," grinned Oliver, regardless of the now-committed rainshower, "*now* you're worked up! Whatever. Shed fever's hard on an engine. I'll give you time to get your smokebox straightened. Have a few more runs, and if you feel differently, well, you know my timetable — you can find me. Cheers, Gordon."

There was nothing else for it. Gordon, water levels well restored, could only chuff off backwards into the rain, making his journey to Tidmouth. The tight, hard lines of his face gave away no more than they had the night before…

For a couple of miles. There was a moment, unseen by anyone, where the wall collapsed. Giving himself up to his driver's lookout, Gordon's eyes screwed up. His maw widened — but made no sound. The next silent mile was an unbroken hiss.

*

But if this moment of weakness left any mark on his face, it blended in well enough with the rain. He looked nothing but bored and disgusted, by the time he reached the turntable.

The light chatting of the others behind his tender appeared not to reach him. He backed deeply into the leftmost berth.

He said nothing to anyone, and no one minded him.

Chapter End Notes

"Parts becoming re-acquainted with each other" and "chatter for England" are phrases I nipped from the understated but expressive prose of AngrySkarloey (which you ought to definitely check out, if you haven't!)

Chapter 12: Toby and the Fat Controller

Chapter Notes

Betcha didn't expect an update so soon, didja? ;)

I make no similar guarantees of swiftness for Chapter 13 (THE FINAL CHAPTER!); I can only do my best.

On the topic of The Final Chapter, however, even once it arrives, and is enjoyed, and the story is marked 'complete,' and even if I am seen to be posting other fic... readers are recommended to ***stay subscribed*** to this one, as there will be… at least one epilogue. At least one.

And the epilogue(s) will, indeed, feature scenes that I began writing only after being inspired by various reader remarks. <3 So next time, enjoy the end of the story — but know that y'all have scored bonus scenes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

12: Toby and the Fat Controller

Toby had been able to have a little doze, up to that point. The Big Yard was in a certain amount of disarray — Thomas was re-organising, and a slow job he was making of it, too. Toby had left Henrietta at the top of the branch line, lest she be swept up into the disorder, and he himself was spending his break (it was a busy day out of the quarry; an old engine had to pace himself) settled among similarly idle and peaceful rolling stock, the chuffs and biffs and clanks from Thomas's campaign pleasantly far-off.

Till now.

"Oh! It's you, Toad."

"Here I am," the brakevan said amiably, an unwrapped chuckle somewhere in his voice. It came through loud and clear, even with Toby well-hidden by a consist of oil tankers. Thomas had come to a stop, and now stayed put, which meant Toby heard despite not wishing to eavesdrop. "And a welcome sight you are, Mr. Thomas."

"... Am I?"

"If you don't mind me mentioning, sir. You look better than last we met."

Thomas scoffed reflexively. "That's a lie — I do not. I'm well beetled, is what I am."

"Perhaps… in a physical sense." (Thomas had a new creak in his motion.) "But you're a little better, too."

Toby blinked to himself, reflecting that Thomas and Toad knew each other better than he'd thought. He'd only ever heard Toad sound quite so familiar with the Little Caley lot — and not always, even then. Mostly he was surprised at Thomas. He'd not credited that the tank engine had so good a relationship with any of the rolling stock. Thomas had been such a tightly-wound ball of thorned pricklies for so long.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't've been much worse…" A frown could be heard breaking into Thomas's voice, a little. "... I haven't been seeing you around. Have I?"

"I suppose not. The Little Caledonian keeps me nice and busy, over their way."

There was the sort of pause that does not simply lag, deadweight for ballast. This one… *unfurled*.

At the end of it, Thomas chuffed a dry, unheated little scoff. "Right. Busy granting wishes, hmm?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Okay, Toad. Whatever you say. You're just an ordinary brake van."

"Just so, Mr. Thomas. Just so. And if I *were* anything else… well! It certainly shouldn't be 'granting wishes'."

There was an absolutely unprecedented note of mild disgust in Toad's voice. Toby was rather glad Thomas gave a chuckle, to disguise his own. For his part, Toby did not know what on earth they were talking about… but it was rather funny, to discover that there was one thing in all the world that would strain Toad's equanimity, after all.

"That's right," said Thomas, "you're an *angel*. Not a genie. Reckon that explains it… I didn't exactly get my wishes granted, did I."

"No." Toad sounded gentle, rather than merely polite. "I'm afraid not. Are you very angry, Mr. Thomas?"

"Angry?" Thomas sounded blank — much as Toby felt. "Uhh… well… no. I mean, not at you. Well, not really angry at anyone, somehow. I got to do a big thing, for once in my life I *mattered*, and I s'pose now — Anyroad, no, I didn't have the right to ask for miracles. I didn't get

what I wanted… maybe it wasn't possible… but. Well. We *did* get Duck. We got the Fat Controller back, too, in a way. Things aren't great, but — s'like an engine can puff freely again. So I… I reckon I owe you one. I dunno if there's anything I can do for an angel, but if I can you should let me know."

Toad had been *tchah*-ing most of this little speech. "No, no, sir," he said. "I've told you, I have no special powers… don't you believe me?"

Thomas snorted. "I don't even know."

"Any relief and improvement you are enjoying around here, you wrought it yourself. You are your own genie."

"That's a frightening thought." Thomas was wry. Toby could imagine the wrinkled nose Thomas wore when he was at his most thoughtful — and sceptical.

"Is it? Forgive me for saying, but I should have thought it more comforting to learn the kind of power you have within yourself. Humility and hard work, friendship and courage — "

"Are very slow," Thomas finished.

"They're the only power decent folk have, in this world. And they accomplish more than one might think."

"But they're — (sorry, Toad) — they're ***bloody slow***."

"But surely, sir, they are better than relying on the whims of the divine."

"Dunno 'bout that." Thomas was dubious, but not glum. "I saw to it that Duck stayed… but he's so miserable, now… and even if I did know how to mend it… D'y'know, I owned up to Neville about what a twat I've been, apologised to him — but I reckon I still owe a dozen more apologies, and I bet they'd be just as well worth it — but I don't want to face them. Then there's Gor—" (Thomas sighed) "I mean, there's still so much *else*, and we're still barely staying above water, financially, and just… it's an awful lot, to keep playing genie."

Toad smiled sadly (you could hear it, in his voice).

"That's life, Mr. Thomas. When challenges are no longer our lot, it's over."

"Cheery. You're a real cheerful brakevan."

"But we can rest, between times," said Toad. "There will come time for you, and your friends, to wring the next miracle. 'Til it comes, I hope you have all the rest you need."

"Oh, I have that all right." Thomas was coming off his brakes, again. He sounded calm enough — with a sort of good grumbley cheer. "One thing this yard's never short on, is rest…"

And he was creaking on with Toad on his buffers, businesslike, saying something about the brakevan guarding his train to Wellsworth… leaving Toby, and his raised eyebrows, in their little hideyhole.

So! Thomas was biffing brakevans now, to see if any heavenly miracles might shake loose. Toby had to chuckle soundlessly over it. Wait till he told Henrietta. He'd not even credited that Thomas (before Duck's return had shaken him up) should remember that little detail of Red Engine-related gossip. Ah, but he'd been desperate, hadn't he? Toby vividly recalled, for an instant, the misery that the blue engine had been crushed under, when Edward and Henry had left. Poor old thing. No stone unturned, eh?

But he couldn't smile over it for very long.

The angel brakevan ploy might be absurd, but Thomas's energy in standing up to Gordon had yielded good results — better results, Toby thought, than Thomas had even given himself credit for (and modesty wasn't something he'd ever known Thomas to be overburdened with). He reckoned Thomas might have quite forgot that he'd originally stood up to Gordon for Toby as well as for Duck — but Toby remembered, and was not ungrateful. What a nice peaceful week they'd been having. Far fewer scowls and glowers among the engines, Thomas reliably in the yard to do the shunting, Oliver keeping to his own Brendam-branch-based timetable instead of sticking his nose in everything… and Toby had no fear of Gordon trapping and cornering him ever again. Toad wasn't wrong. Thomas really had done that — whether one could believe it or not.

Well, Thomas was funny that way. He could surprise an engine. How he'd loathed Toby, when Toby had first come over! His envy and resentment had been palpable, like the blast of a furnace. (Why he had dropped the grudge and grinned cheekily at Toby one random day, Toby never knew.) So if Thomas's fresh round of odd behaviour were all, well then it would be all.

But was it? Toby was discovering there was much more than he'd thought going on around him. Goodness, there had been all that business on the branch line lately, the whole story of Emily's ill-fated old pass-the-hat initiative finally reaching Toby and Henrietta. It was a very Emilyean thing to do — Toby had found himself asking why he hadn't suspected it, from various hints, long ago. (A worse little part of

him asked why he hadn't thought of such a thing, himself.) Of course the business had caused more harm than good. Naturally. Poor young Emily hadn't the benefit of being trained up properly. She'd been built in singleton, not brought up to speed amid a host of other engines, and even if it were otherwise she'd likely have come out of Doncaster Works, and, well… look what such an education had done for Gordon. Toby, being a much more sensible Stratford product, had the benefit of many others' bitter experience packaged and fed to his class in the form of little stories. He'd been taught early on that it was an engine's lot to adapt to the tracks he was put on… that trying to plough your own fresh groove was a fool's errand.

D'ye nae hae feelings, Toby?

Of course he had. And he knew very well that there were some unavoidably terrible things in life. But he still believed that engines, and indeed people too, were about as happy as they made up their minds to be. He believed nothing good came from little engines trying to change a big world. Look at Duck — sensible and well-trained as he'd been, he'd given into the temptation to Make Things Happen once, and look what a dreadful price he had paid for it. And to think the idea had come from Edward! But, as Toby had remarked to Henrietta a few times (in the direct aftermath of Duck's disastrous deputation) for all *his* good sense Edward had always been rather more forward in this direction than Toby's upbringing could allow. Until Edward had tried to escape his fate in the Big Shed, this had tended to go pretty well for him and his; no wonder the poor fellow had dared to risk Duck trying it.

But then… there was Oliver. Headstrong and nervey in equal measure, chronically a nuisance — in contrast to steady, sensible, friendly, wise old Toby. Both engines had been passed into B.R. ownership, both had been condemned to uselessness. One of the two had actively secured happy refuge for himself and his beloved train — and it was not Toby.

It ate at Toby, a bit… but he'd always put it back out of mind. Oliver was a fluke. Donald had run some risk to help him during the last leg of Oliver's flight, but that was… also a fluke. Never mind that it was

not the first time Donald had been so bold, not the first time he had saved an engine. Fluke, again. Surely. Douglas had come very, very close to being sent back. The Fat Controller seemed to have kept him on only to keep Donald and the Twins' friends happy.

Yet what had Toby seen, just this past Monday? He'd put it out of his mind, hadn't even told Henrietta about it, though it had been well worth remarking: Douglas passing carefully through the Big Station with his goods — with a conspiratorial grin at the Fat Controller, from behind Gordon's tender!

And the Fat Controller — nodding back at him! His manner and look dignified, but no less satisfied.

It was only one step removed from exchanging winks — and it very much appeared that this communication was *about Gordon*. Toby had thought his eyes might be playing a trick on him.

No… for a dozen reasons, he couldn't have discussed it with Henrietta.

But look — there was the Fat Controller right now, surveying the yard's activity. Standing at the very back end of the station platform, hands behind his back. Quite like old times. He was often about and visible again, since that first morning he had re-appeared at the sheds, and it made a world of difference to his engines.

This was exact sort of opportunity that Toby had been looking for — and indeed had sometimes pretended not to see, when he'd got it.

"Let's go to the station," he said to his driver, this time.

Driver was very comfortable, taking a smoke break with Fireman and a goods shunter. "Emily will have the section tied up. We have time."

"I need to speak with the Fat Controller." Toby *heard* himself sounding antsy. "Now. Before we miss him."

Driver told Fireman to take the engine the necessary few hundred feet. Fireman sighed deeply and, resigned to his fate, climbed aboard. But for all Fireman's dawdling, they didn't miss their man. Sir Topham was still gazing upon the yard and line, very deep in thought… looking, on closer inspection, as if it were no very good moment to interrupt.

But it was such a lame excuse, after so many unconscionable delays, that Toby couldn't let himself get away with it. He chuffed forward to approach.

"I mayn't have time 'sometime soon'," said the Fat Controller, after hellos were exchanged, and Toby had asked to speak with him about something privately. "But I have a moment now. What's the matter?"

Toby bit his lip. It shouldn't be this hard. If he'd regularly been around more senior engines over the past few decades to model his own behaviour after, it probably wouldn't be. But here he was — and it would be irresponsible to waffle any longer. "I'd… like your consideration when it comes to the end of my service," he began.

For all his dread, Toby still spoke slowly and steadily (in long-rehearsed words), and it was very easy for Sir Topham to interrupt him with a brief nod. "Which we all hope is no time soon."

"Of course not, sir. But — things do happen. And if they do — "

The Fat Controller only nodded again, before he could find his place in his mental script. "You would like to be stored with Henrietta."

"Yes, sir." Toby felt a greater relief than he'd let himself anticipate. "And Elsie, if she'd be left lonely otherwise — although I imagine you could put her to some real use, and she should like that. Furthermore — "

"Furthermore, even if you were together, you should rather be scrapped in a timely fashion, if the alternative were to be abandoned forever," Sir Topham finished. He sounded sober, almost… muted. Not entirely unlike that day of the family picnic at the cove. But there was warmth in his voice, nevertheless, and Toby began to smile, the ease of this talk beyond anything he'd imagined. "I expect this has worried you for some time, Toby, and I'm sorry for that."

"Oh, no." Toby was still light with relief. "I mean, it is a weight off my mind. You *do* understand, sir."

The Fat Controller gave a wry little laugh.

"You give me too much credit, Toby. I'm afraid I've been rather a blockh—" He glanced for an instant at Toby's shape and corrected himself. " — dunce, on this point. But it's all taken care of. Edward spoke to me quite seriously on this point, before he left." He smiled a little, at Toby's look of surprise. "Became rather bold with me, on the subject. Had me promise that I should not allow the rest of you to be left in the same limbo he endured. And he made particular mention of yours and Henrietta's needs, as a little family. You seem more shocked now than before," the man added, wryly — not so much examining Toby's expression as hearing, with his superb ear, the change in his droning hiss of steam. "I am not sure why you should! Edward always did know the value of seeing to the safety and comfort of the vehicles around him. Even so," the Fat Controller added, now rather rueful, "I may have underrated his managerial sense. I would have benefited greatly by conferring with him sooner."

Toby couldn't have explained, himself, why he was so suddenly overcome with a painful breathlessness. "He was a good friend," he muttered, finding himself unable to look up.

*I'm not sure that **I** am.*

Edward was literally rusting to death, he'd got the interview he'd been waiting an eternity for, and still *he put himself out for us…?*

It's everyone, then. Literally everyone.

This is the sort of thing they've all been doing.

And it… it does help.

Maybe I'm…

As if hearing his thoughts, the Fat Controller broke into them at just the right juncture. "He was. But he had a special regard for you, Toby, as well he might have. This railway saw some of its best days when the two of you worked that line together."

Toby could remember. It had been a happy time…

"Emily really does very well," he found himself saying, slowly.

"I know it," agreed the Fat Controller, very firm. If he were surprised by this turn of thought he did not show it. "I never said otherwise. If anything, perhaps I had ought to have invested in her sooner… but I never meant to compare them, and I hope she does not feel that she is in competition with a ghost."

"Perhaps she does, sir," mumbled Toby… blushing. "A little."

"I trust you can help her chip away at that feeling," Sir Topham nodded at him, confident and confidential. "Anyway, I only meant to reminisce a little. That branch line was my father's pride and joy. You and he and both your trains were all great friends, and everyone who met you was the happier for it. I suppose nothing lasts — we're none of us getting any younger — but that is the sort of thing that makes everything worth it."

"Yes, sir… Sometimes we get better than, perhaps, we deserve."

"Not too often," the Fat Controller laughed, dryly.

"I did say sometimes."

"Sometimes, indeed." The Fat Controller glanced at the clock, more by reflex than anything. "But some of you, my dear tram, deserve the world. Now, before we're both off, listen to me carefully. What you've asked me for is already taken care of. In extremity you and your train are to be stored, together, at Ffarquhar sheds, and a schedule of visits by various personnel are mandated. The orders are written out, and they have already been promulgated to the offices involved. So no matter what you may hear soon, do know that this point is not one over which you need fret. And you may ask the stationmaster here, or at Ffarquhar, or indeed your own driver, if you wish to be sure it's all settled — as no doubt you will. They should all know all about it."

"Thank you, sir, very much." Toby hesitated. "Erm — if I hear what soon?"

The Fat Controller appeared not to hear, as he tucked away his pocket watch. "We had better get back to it. Give my love to Henrietta."

Toby watched him stride out of the station, unhurried but with great purpose, towards the car park… presumably towards his faithful blue saloon. He was bemused — but ultimately there was far more assurance than puzzle in the Fat Controller's words, and Toby soon settled into a sigh of relief and of an odd, audible clang. *We're none of us getting any younger*.

No, they were not. And maybe insulating oneself in peace and order and routine was no way to avoid that fate.

He spent no little time sitting there, too lost in his thoughts to resume work. Indeed he meditated for so long that the primary character who had kept emerging from his whirling examination of conscience came in with the next stone delivery.

Emily was surprised to see him still idle, as she had some right to be, and there was an arch note in her voice when she asked if there was some trouble, while Toby simply said no, he'd had a rest. She concealed approximately half her annoyance over this… but the rest of it sort of came out, when she found Thomas was gone, and she must finish shunting her return train.

Toby thought about pointing out that she herself had said, not so long ago, that Thomas could be put to better use than sorting everyone's trains for them, and that this sort of thing would indeed be the result of her desired change in policy… And then he heroically refrained,

helping her sort it out without further comment. Wanting, indeed, to see what she would talk about, if left to her own devices.

It turned out the answer was very little. They rerouted the trucks in relative silence… Toby, for one, reflecting that sometimes friendships are easy. Familiarity flourishes like thistle.

He didn't have much experience, having to work for it.

Ironically, the closest precedent he had was… Thomas.

The thought made him smile. If he'd survived Thomas's initial hostility, he could wear down Emily's cool, offended distance. He just had to put in the effort.

It was only when Toby and his train of empties were waiting on a road back to the quarry that he piped up. "On Saturday I'll be overnighting at Ffarquhar sheds," he announced.

She quirked an eyebrow, and there was a familiar hard bite in her tone when he said, "Do you have some sort of special on Sunday, that will require an early start?"

"No. Same old timetable. I'll be staying over every Saturday from now on, actually."

Her eyes narrowed. She actually looked faintly Gordonesque for an instant — faintly. A random little instant, meaningless but amusing. "Why?"

"To irritate you," said Toby calmly.

Sometimes signalmen are the most timely, obliging fellows in the world. Toby's signal dropped almost before she had finished her huff, and he was able to clang a cheery good-bye with his bell.

*

Word spread that very evening, like a ball of rolling lightning. Making everyone fall silent and wide-eyed for an instant, and then light up with horrified vitality afterwards. By the end of the workday, the news had hit the Big Shed.

It was the men and women who staffed the railway who were — if native Sudrian, at least (which many still were; they didn't attract many come-overs, these days) — almost instantly snuffed out. The loss of Gordon had been a blow, but it had been temporary and, even if it hadn't been, still it should not have been so dark an omen as *this*.

The engines were utterly baffled, and although anxious they did not — at first — despair. "Stationmaster at Vicarstown?" asked Thomas… wondering how Rosie should take it. If this were real. Which it couldn't be. "But… But he's no stationmaster."

"No," said his driver grimly, "he isn't."

"Never was," said his fireman.

Emily spoke slowly. "It's irregular... " (She ignored Gordon's soft snort.) "... but at least he's not gone altogether?"

"Yes, he is."

This was Gordon. His voice was an ominous rumble, but there was no aggression in it and certainly it was the first word he had ever spoken to Emily without malice. It was almost the first he had ever spoken to her at all. The news was far too great an earthquake for spite… albeit Gordon gave no hint of any emotion whatsoever. He did not appear to even notice the fear on *the replica's* face, much less gloat over it.

"Gordon's right," said her driver. "It's not a serious proposition and no one expects Sir Topham to take the post."

"It's beneath his station," agreed Gordon… still a neutral, hollow rumble.

"The Board probably asked for his resignation," said Gordon's driver. "He'd never give it, so this is how they force him out. Demotion."

"But surely," said Emily, a little desperately, "surely he won't *leave?*"

"You have the least of anyone here to worry about," said Thomas. His voice was quiet, devoid of the venom with which he should have admitted this two months ago. "You're the newest build, and your passengers know and love you. Relax."

"*Relax?* " (Despite her indignation, her face *had* lightened to be reminded that she was no longer in quite the same awkward position she had been in when the Fat Controller's offer had been her narrow escape.) "But — But how can they do this to him?! He's been here since, what? The beginning of nationalisation?"

"1949." Thomas's voice was as hollow as Gordon's. "Started as CME, until his father retired."

"So the Hatts have lead this railway since basically *forever*," said Emily softly. "How *could* they?"

"It's only because of his name that they're being this diplomatic about it," said Gordon's driver. "A pretty string of controversies, he's had. And to pull us off the Nor'wester without necessity — "

"It paid off!" argued Emily. "The island was reminded what they had, in Gordon. The train is *better* patronised now, than it was!"

"Doesn't mean the Board wasn't shitting bricks, the whole fortnight. And then there was that little scandal about misappropriated funds…"

Gordon's driver raised an eyebrow at her, then never said another word about the matter. Gordon and Thomas were quite blank and baffled, to see Emily blush and then stare at the ground a long time, tears standing unshed in her eyes.

"Will he really resign, Driver?" Thomas asked Emily's driver, voice glum.

"Afraid so, Thomas. Vicarstown… it's not even a warm-body post, like Knapford would have been. The Exchange Yard is busy. Crisis every day."

"Mm," agreed Gordon's driver. "Sir Topham's too well-off and too close

to retirement to deal with this rubbish. Disgraceful is what it is!"

The drivers and firemen lingered that night — at first the engines might have thought that shock and sorrow were playing tricks, slowing their sense of time, but after a while it became apparent that their people really were making a slow production of every little chore. Emily's crew took the longest of all, and yet the other men simply drifted and waited in a scrum by the exit, apparently unwilling to leave to battle the rain without them. Emily's driver raised his eyebrows at her at the last, even though Thomas was vaguely aware that he had asked her if she were "sure" several times already. *Go on*, mouthed Emily, white as a dingy sheet, looking as though she really were St. Catherine about to face the wheel. Yet her face was crumpled in such misery that it seemed that whatever hard words the other engines might say to her overnight would, if anything, relieve her feelings.

It was Thomas's driver who stepped over and clasped a hand on his shoulder, moving him on with some word of murmured assurance.

But he paused, too, alongside Emily's driver, surveying every smokebox the whole length of the shed.

"Try not to worry yourselves sick," he said. His voice echoed along the shed, in the unusual quietude. He coughed. "I know how you engines are. It's a big change and no mistake. But try not to worry too much. The Board is still committed to Sodor rail, they simply think they can find another manager to do it better."

"Aye," groused Donald. "And what if their next thought is to find ither engines to do it better?"

Thomas's driver was placid in the face of such cheek. (He had practice enough.) "Well, lad — with what funds? Repairs for Duck, hiring

Neville for more trains… Fat Controller spent the coffers on his way out." This was a new angle, and you could see the thought slightly lightening some half the smokeboxes in the shed.

"Our people like you engines, too," Emily's driver put in. "You have plenty of friends still."

"Nae need to despair," agreed one of the Twins' drivers. "Battle's nae done. Have ye all a guid rest."

The men vanished through the exit into the drone of windy rain in the unsettlingly quiet way that humans can.

What was left in the dim red emergency lights was — gloom. Perhaps those kind words were a brake that stopped the engines' decline when it was inches from despair. But what hope the men had injected into the smokey air was weak — and hope rots fast.

For a good while one great engine after another, individually, stared down and ahead, seeing nothing. Their boilers hissed, Gordon's firebox clicked, rain drummed the roof above mercilessly… and they heard nothing. At last the wind changed, and blew the rain in a new direction, a new pattern. It made all of them shiver, and none of them look to another.

As is so often the way, when one finally spoke, several others did too, all at once.

"I'm sorry, everyone," said Thomas — at the same time Duck coughed and began a few stilted words — which were drowned out by Emily half-whispering, half-groaning "*It's my fault*."

The sheer emotion of the lattermost's words carried the moment. All eyes slid slowly towards the Stirling, still an unfamiliar shape in the Big Sheds at all, and at that moment staring aghast at the closed berth door ahead of her with tears standing in her eyes.

Emily's face had crumpled. "It's…" Her whisper was hollow and hoarse. "... it's because of me…"

The others stared, bemused and wary. For once no one had really thought to blame her.

"... there was… I caused… I caused a, a financial irregularity on my line, when I first came… people have been complaining, they blame the Fat Controller — "

Emily had never once yet been able to use Sir Topham's nickname without being put in her place. But this time it was not why Thomas scoffed loudly.

"When you first came? Then what's that have to do with anything?"

"This railway was in decline afore ye were built, lassie," agreed Donald, subdued. "Dinnae take tha' oon."

"'S'me, anyway." Douglas looked equally miserable. "Ahm allus damaging goods."

"Haud yer wheest." Donald's eyebrows knit furiously at his brother.

"Yeah, you and the trucks have been rattling the hell out of all your

trains for a thousand years," said Thomas, impatient, "that's not what's caused this *now*."

"S'true," Douglas insisted, in a sort of snit of desperate self-flagellation. "Ahve druv muir than yin client to the lorries!"

"If you all should be blaming someone, it's ME." Thomas was equally despondent. And louder. "I was an idiot to tell the Fat Controller that we could cover the Express… I should have *listened* when you all said…" He trailed off, too glum to finish the thought.

"The passengers have come back," said Emily quietly. "Receipts are up a bit, even. It's not that."

"But that fortnight of itself, Emily," said Toby, sober. "It rattled the Board… I ought to have supported you, when you asked to cover the Express," he ruminated. "Perhaps it should not have been such a crisis, if *you*'d managed it."

"Thanks, Toby," said Thomas, almost too glum for sarcasm.

Almost.

"I didn't mean like that; I don't blame you. You did your best. We've all failed." Toby, eying Gordon and the Great Westerners, repeated a bit more firmly: "We all broke it."

Oliver looked indignant. But Duck did not meet anyone's eye at all, a dull blush high in his smokebox at he gazed at the sleepers of his berth.

"It's me," he said… for all his averted gaze, very clearly and distinctly. "My return caused the whole trouble."

"Codswallop," snapped Donald, louder and faster than the crack of lightning that trailed his word, "ye ought neer hae been sent away at all. An' it all wuild hae groond to a halt sooner or later, e'en if ye'd stayed an' Henry returned. It was neither of *ye* tha' was the problem…"

He trailed off, tone hard and significant.

They took his meaning. One pair of dull eyes after another slid further down the shed — towards the great blue engine in the furthest berth. It seemed even in the aftermath of his grounding that he had taken up residence there, in that half-haunted corner.

After everyone's attention had converged on him, Gordon peered down at them all. He curled his lip, and raised his eyebrows, sardonic. "I don't suppose any of you wish to know *my* thoughts on the matter."

"No."

"Nae."

"Nope."

"Not really."

"God forbid."

"Not tonight, thanks."

"Wuild ruther haul a long train aff a short pier."

Gordon's eyes flicked away again, to the vent duct in the brick wall. "Hrmph."

Everyone spoke either in a hush or a flat glum murmur; no one's voice was heated. No one's voice mounted any real challenge to the drone and whoosh of the night's rain.

Perhaps it was a sign of everyone's growth, that no argument arose.

Perhaps it was a sign of how little they had grown, that everyone spent the night almost paralyzed and sleepless — and not a one of them could confide their fears in another.

The dim shed fell into another hush, from whence they did not revive, all those stormy and wind-whipped hours.

Chapter End Notes

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See you next time for Chapter 13: ***And So It Begins***

(Bring tissues.)

Chapter 13: And So It Begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13: And So It Begins

The scrapyard was all right, really.

This was, Edward knew, probably not much more than a reflection of how terrible the years preceding had been. But there it was.

His eyes had re-adjusted to daylight. It was pleasant to be outdoors again — out of the dark and under the wide sky, rain or shine. Of course rain did aggravate his aches and rust, but he was long accustomed to pain and so the price was well worth it. Even in this grim barren site, there were unmistakable signs of spring, and after such a long confinement his spirits couldn't help but rise as he wiled away the hours watching the swooping patterns of faraway birds and feeling the breeze running through him on its way.

It was sad, of course. But this was a place where one could be sad, and broken, and beaten. Without shame, and without a sense of burdening others. Edward was shunted out of the way, that first evening, to a little spur not far from the garage, among the "Odds 'n Bods" — an assortment of peculiar rubbish from road and rail alike, segregated from the rest. From this vantage point Edward couldn't see much of the work that went on in the greater part of the yard and, considering what at least some of the mysterious commotion must entail, he couldn't be too sorry for it. Throughout the day the men typically had music blasting for hours — blasted at the highest possible volume, because they often had grinders or other loud machinery running, and anyway “there’s no one ‘round here to be bothered!” Edward privately took umbrage with this notion because *he* was there and the screaming, distorted music they preferred did not to his turn-of-

century sensibilities in any way resemble “songs.” It all sounded about the same to him — each change in tempo heralding a new noise that was as horrible as the one before.

Despite this, their music did have one great virtue: It wasn’t silence. It was *better* than all those years of dark silence, and, given a few more weeks, he suspected (with great resignation) that he was probably going to have chosen one of the same fifteen or so dreadful tracks that the radio station seemed to cycle through as his favourite.

To be sure, most nights were wet and shivery. After the humans left, the other Odds n' Bods — mismatched diesel rail units, funny little foreign tractors, half-dismantled but still perfectly vocal road vehicles — tried to taunt the newcomers, sometimes. Not often. For one thing, it was a poor show whenever they tried, for their sneers only betrayed their own chattering teeth, and the two steam engines knew that there were worse things to endure, than mere exposure to the elements. Then, too, they soon discovered that, on evenings when the big engine had been in steam — and he was only ever wanted fairly late into the day — it was very pleasant for Henry to hiss on over when the humans were done with him. They dropped his fire, of course, but he would waft warm steam for a good half-an-hour and that meant that for a half-an-hour the rest of them were almost… cosy. Their neighbours finally owned that it was better for the yard to have a steam than a diesel shunter, and Henry became a favourite of theirs. It seemed Duck had never been so sociable.

Nor had Duck ever exchanged so many words with their owner. The Mangy Controller, Henry now called him. Henry was only ever steamed up perhaps every third day. It soon transpired that he couldn’t do a job for the Mangy Controller without — to quote the man — "making that face." Their new owner often swore at Henry, although in an idle sort of way, and Henry didn’t seem to mind much. Instead he took it for license to be as sarcastic and fussy as he pleased. The scrapyard inhabitants enjoyed these little clashes; they were a welcome break in the monotony, and Henry was soon eyed with some respect. The Odds n' Bods were less impressed when, in the evenings after Henry had been parked, he complained to Edward at fussy and familiar length about each one of those tiffs. Edward liked this more

than he was willing to readily admit (for Henry always grumbled so much without encouragement at all, and so there was obvious risk in inviting more of it). But it had been a long time since the others had felt free to be so open and honest with him about their troubles. This felt familiar and fine and comfortable. Their nearest neighbours were a little less tolerant than Edward of this nightly 'boiler-aching.' But they did find Henry referring to 'the Mangy Controller' pretty funny. The nickname spread through the whole vast yard in a week.

Henry looked quite different now. After a couple high-pressure, high-profanity sessions trying to help their new shunter navigate the cramped switches of the yard and the little private line that went to the smelters upstream, the Mangy Controller had uncovered a chipped Hunslet saddletank from God-knew-which corner of industrial gravesite. Uncoupled went the tender; atop went the saddle… as well as the better part of the daylight, as the men torched, welded, threaded, and cursed their way into a makeshift brace (the saddle was rather smaller than Henry's boiler) and plumbing system (bound with cables) that allowed Henry to carry water with him. Coal was not such a problem; they simply kept a bin on the footplate. Henry didn't go far, or do very much. He subsisted easily — if not happily — on small rations. Edward made what attempts he could to hide his horror, until he'd grown used to his friend's new look. The other vehicles had laughed outright… for a bit.

The big engine was strangely unbothered. "There's no one here to see," he told Edward, a shrug in his voice.

Enjoy wasn't quite the word, but Henry seemed to… do something that was loosely related to it, on the days he was put in steam. The Mangy Controller was "selling" a parcel of land (or it was being reclaimed by its rightful owners — something like that), and he was focussed, those first few weeks, on relocating all the junk that sat on the annexation zone to some other part of the yard. They often took their lorry and excavator, and sometimes Henry, for long hours of unseen work.

Henry was vague about the details, and at first Edward assumed the relocation project had delayed any scrapping. He was caught off guard

the night the Van on Cinderblock (a powerful but lamed vehicle, who was missing his forward axle and most of his front) asked how it had been for ol' so-and-so, and Henry said quietly that there had been no issues. He avoided Edward's widened eyes.

"This wasn't your first," Edward said at last, in a low murmur. Hours and hours into the night, when they had the illusion of privacy.

Henry didn't exactly respond with a single intelligible syllable. And it was too dark to read his face.

Yet something about his indistinct mumble was answer enough.

They shared pitch-black silence for many long moments.

"How is it?" Edward asked at last.

Henry considered. "Quiet. Quieter than any of the stories."

"Mmm. I've heard nothing." *I thought they could at least scream*.

Henry might have heard it in his tone. "He takes pride in it. Knowing how to do it painlessly."

Another night-loud silence.

"The cars and things, they're easy. He could send them off in his sleep. If it's something he's not seen before, he does his research. He won't

start till he knows what he's doing."

That's us, Edward supposed. *That's likely why we Odds n' Bods sit and wait around over here.*

"I wish I'd known," he murmured. "That you started."

"Nothing to know. I knew the deal when I made it… it's not even so bad as I feared." Henry seemed to want to stop there — certainly after this one night he went back to ignoring any of Edward's attempts to speak about it — but just then he seemed unable to help adding: "... so far."

Edward was cold with a chill that the damp night air couldn't match.

"I wish — "

"Don't." Henry's voice was quiet, but firm. "You've done all you could. Don't worry about me."

Worry!

Worry wasn't the word.

How had he never seen this mettle in the green engine? For much of both their lives Edward had had to watch Henry's imagination torment him into attacks of anxiety over next to nothing; had tried, sometimes in vain, to help him manage his panic over darkness and strangers and weather.

Yet as it turned out when dome-deep in very real horror and defeat Henry proved enterprising and coolly practical. It silently awed Edward… who was built quite the inverse. In his case imagination had often helped him take the edge off reality; you could approach your worst fears and griefs with sideways anticipation, handling them with the rubber gloves and gas mask of tall tale. Whereas imagination had shaken Henry much of his life in a way that the harshest reality seemed powerless to do. Perhaps the world could never match Henry's worst fears.

Whatever it was, Edward respected it greatly… and it grieved him, too.

It wasn't fair.

His friend deserved so much more from life than he'd ever got.

What was to happen to him, once Edward was cut up? Henry had wanted to stay by his side to offer comfort, but who would comfort him? The other inmates here might like him but they didn't care for him that way… none of them would be alive long enough, surely, to ever come to that point. Edward watched Henry one day eying the growth near the fence, half-hidden by the deepest siding. For the first time Edward realised there was another van back there, being slowly enveloped by the foliage, having long disappeared into a faceless silence (but was a vehicle conscious, in that state? one was never sure). Why it had not been cut up Edward couldn't fathom… unless it had asked for this end? Not a very profitable end, from the Mangy Controller's point of view, but perhaps it had earned a favour. It made an eerie tableau, at any rate. Henry's face was set in a mask — Henry! Henry, who once would let the entire yard know whenever he had the slightest touch of boilerache! — but that mask was enough to tell the old engine his friend's thoughts. What stage of resignation Henry was at really, Edward couldn't be sure. But that he was envisioning his own similar end was abundantly clear. There was some possibility of his coming to terms with it… Henry had always had a queer,

unmachine-like love of green growing things.

But he shouldn't have to come to terms with it.

Not yet. Not yet…

For himself, Edward had no similar concerns. He had been dying for years. Even before that fateful train. He'd known long before it that he was breaking down, with a sort of blessed easy slowness; he'd long ago made peace with the dawning knowledge that his end was coming... made peace with it slowly and gradually, without conscious effort. The overriding insecurity that had once made him strive had been ground down, worn out like his bearings, his springs, his stays, his everything. But it was replaced at each small turn with acceptance. The pride that had once been tortured by the racket of his own grinding and clanking and the increasing lateness of his trains — always well-concealed — had begun to subside as year after year proved that he was still needed despite all that. Old anxiety to conceal any mechanical fault that he could work through had faded into frank, weary honesty when his driver started fussing and tinkering and dragging him to the fitters… he wanted all the time he could have, after all. His home had never been more dear to him. But he'd known. He'd accepted. He'd had a long life, with much more good and use in it than most.

His mistake was never imagining that his inevitable breakdown would happen so publicly. In those days he was seldom ever beyond his own branch line. He'd heard word of the scheduled enthusiasts' train, of course, but without thinking nor hoping it would be assigned to him — Gordon was the main attraction of the fleet, and if he could not be spared (which was rather likely) then the Caledonians would make a good draw; they were nearly Edward's own age but in much better condition, and while they sometimes ran afoul of the Fat Controller it was hardly likely that they'd both be in disgrace at the same time. When he'd learned the job would in fact be his he'd not felt any real foreboding, despite spotting the oddity. "Fat Controller still thinks I'm a sprightly forty-five," he'd said to himself, and smiled over it, part of him indeed as pleased and proud as if he *were*, and as if he still

desperately needed each and every sign of his owner's approval — but a much bigger part of him pure, untroubled affection. Sir Topham Hatt's weak grip on the concept of time had then been an endearing foible. His engine couldn't have known that he was mere weeks away from starting a new phase of life in which that same quality would become a horrifying flaw.

But that was over… Edward was not in the least disposed to now remember the despair of those intervening years. The red engine with the desperate voice and tormented face had broken him out of that prison. It still made no sense. But the stranger had proved his bizarre claim to friendship by driving the Fat Controller to him and Edward had been prepared by eons of planning to make the most of that audience...

He had been confident that his departure from the Big Shed would be a help to every last one of his colleagues, removing from them a grief that could never diminish so long as it was always before them.

But Henry had followed him here.

Henry had often been doubted over the years but Edward had long ago been satisfied that Henry was a true and accurate judge of his own strength. If Henry did not believe that he could endure Sodor without Edward then it must be true… and if it were true it meant that he had been suffering lonely despair beyond even what Edward had suspected. (He *ought* to have seen it.)

It was intolerable to think of Henry dying here. The green engine was rather long-lived by this point, too. But his triumphs had always been bitterly brief for how hard-earned they'd been and his position had always been precarious. He was a lot like Thomas, in that way, both knowing almost nothing of service except Sodor and never coming into their prime. But Thomas still had time. Where there was time there was hope. Henry had reckoned his time was up… and Edward found it desperately difficult to reconcile himself to that fact.

He'd thought he'd provided for all his friends, before he left — in what limited way a broken engine could, of course. But every time he now laid eyes on Henry's new appearance, the absurd, dodgy "*rebuild*" mocked the inadequacy of Edward's hopes and plans...

*

This was the long, winding, hopeless circuit that that Edward wandered round and round, whenever the birds and the machinery and the radio failed to keep him sufficiently free of his own thoughts.

Yet he did so less and less as the days went on. Perhaps it was selfish, perhaps it was weak. But he was impossibly weary of this sort of thing. While stuck back in that hell of a shed, impotently witnessing the other engines' decline and misery had been in no way the least of his suffering.

To accept that he was beyond helping anyone was to accept death.

But he'd done that once before. In spite of Henry's unlooked-for presence, he would likely accept it again.

He was, after all, in the scrapyard. When you were here, you only had one job left — and it was to accept just that.

*

Meanwhile...

The days were lengthening, now. It was still twilight when, with a screech and a swish, Gordon brought his seven-o'-clock train under the glass canopy of the Big Station. The coaches discharged their efflux of passengers. Some optimistic souls waved to the engine as they headed towards the top exit. And Gordon deigned to look.

This was his mistake.

The Fat Controller — The *Acting* Controller, technically — intercepted his eye and looked up pointedly at the station clock. The Express was two minutes late… again. It was now regularly one or two or three minutes late.

"Ever since your return to service," observed Sir Topham. "A bit childish, Gordon, don't you think?"

He turned on his heel. Gordon lifted his eyebrows, slightly and briefly.

But the great express engine kept his tongue firmly under lead. It wasn't safe to speak… not until he knew how things would turn out.

The Board were interviewing candidates for a new Controller. He wished they'd hurry up with it.

In the meantime, he sighed irritably and betook himself to Knapford yards… which, bit by bit, were growing rather tidy. To Gordon's eye it seemed Thomas was taking it much more slowly than necessary, that a sufficiently motivated engine could have cleared it all up in a day or two, between their normal shunting. Nevertheless the progress had been steady and visible. If that were all, the big engine should have

had no cause for complaint. Indeed he might have offered Thomas a lofty word of praise (which meant it were lucky, indeed, that this generous impulse was prevented) if he hadn't found the tank engine's *demeanor* to be so much less commendable.

Now, even Gordon could not quite call it 'cheery'. He had not failed to note that Thomas had undergone mysterious absences… he had not failed to guess why the tank engine might need spells of privacy, now that he again had time on his buffers. And yet…

Between those bouts of secret tears, Thomas could be *heard* again as he worked among the trucks and coaches, taking their complaints or cheek with neither the tooting reactivity of old nor the close-mouthed indifference of late. He told his charges where they were bound, instead of leaving them in suspense. He could occasionally be heard exchanging small talk about the weather. And he traded quip for quip — a little tiredly, but he did *answer* them. Which Gordon (who had never shunted anything in his life) was absolutely certain was not good practice.

Not least of all, the tank engine sometimes greeted him with a whistle that had an old, old, long-absent teasing note to it.

At that note, Gordon's eyes flicked over to the shunter warily. Thomas winked, then waggled his eyebrows. "*Hrrrrrmm, yessh, Gordon, a bit* ***childish****, yessh, don't you think?*"

Gordon rolled his eyes. "Cheeky," he muttered — and did not clarify whom he meant.

But Thomas seemed to have a good idea. He considered Gordon's retreating form for an instant — then chuffed after him.

"Are you happy he's leaving?"

Thomas pitched his voice low, discreet — but in very much an *interested* whisper.

Gordon slowed to another stop… and raised his eyebrows.

"What. a. question!"

"I'm just having a guess. I mean, based on everything you've been saying for ages now…" Gordon did not say anything further, and Thomas filled the quiet. "It's *weird*, by the way, me having to wonder. On a matter as big as this. You've never been shy about sharing your views before!"

Gordon snorted.

"No one minds me now." It was Thomas's turn to say nothing, until finally Gordon huffed and grumbled some more: "You have all made that very clear — you especially."

"We're pro'lly going to disagree with your opinion — "

"No doubt."

" — doesn't mean I don't want to know it."

"I do not need to *submit* my thoughts to you for review, little — "

"Fizzling fireboxes," Thomas snapped, "sorry for caring. Keep your old thoughts then — if you're so proud about it."

"I certainly do not care to submit myself to the indignity of being shouted down."

"Who's ever shouted *you* down?!"

For the first time, Gordon's eyes found his.

And pinned him.

"Oh," said Thomas, blushing to remember. "That was me. The day… right…" But Gordon was turning up his nose in a martyrish way, and Thomas's fire sparked again, his blush receding. "Boo hoo. I shouted you down because you were *way* out of line. You sent Duck to the mainland for disagreeing with you. You tried to do it twice! Maybe you don't shout at engines, but you punish them. And that's worse! I heard the way you went at Henry that morning — after I'd gone and set that up for you! You said you were going to try to get him to help keep Edward here, you didn't tell me you were going to have a go at him. I was stupid to trust you. You've always bullied anyone who crosses you — "

"I do not 'bully', little Thomas. I lead."

"Yeah, well. When nobody wants to go where you're dragging them, that's not leading."

"Oh-h-h!" Gordon rolled his eyes. "The little tank engine is an expert on the subject now."

"I am not. But I know that much."

"Well, it's nothing to me," said Gordon… with a grand, elaborate air. "You lot of little plodders have deposed me. It is now the day of the peasants — "

"The *what*?"

"It took only a month of revolt and anarchy before your precious Fat Controller was stripped of his post. This is a problem of your own making; you must face the consequences without looking to me for rescue."

Thomas snorted. "No one's looking to you for 'rescue,' you daft blimp! I only asked what you've been thinking."

"Very friendly of you, I'm sure."

"Trust me, I'm already sorry. This was a mistake. I have peasant things to do, Gordon, I'll leave you alone."

"Most do," huffed Gordon bitterly… and softly. So quietly, under the noise of Thomas pressing steam into his cylinders, that the tank engine might not have heard it.

*

Thomas didn't know why he bothered, sometimes. Trying to throw out a line to Gordon. Trying to throw out at line to Duck. Raising steam each morning.

He'd had a hard time, after the Fat Controller's defeat by the Board. Of course, the Fat Controller had come to the engines, the very morning after the news had broken, and assured them that it did not matter in which capacity he served — he was not leaving the railway. He wasn't leaving *them*.

This speech and promise (there had been few dry eyes, by the end of it) had done much to staunch the bleeding.

But they were all shattered — even Gordon, Thomas was pretty sure, was at least *stunned* — and Thomas had been particularly slow to recover. He'd simply taken far too many blows of late. Now that he had the usual idle time during his days, he could stop and really feel, all at once, the various enormities that had rained down on him since the Red Engine's whirlwind visit.

For a while the world had been very difficult. Toby did not renew his invitation for Thomas to escape to Ffarquhar for a night but Neville did let Thomas know that his little shed at the harbour was unoccupied during the day and that he would not be disturbed if he ever found Thomas there, asleep or sleepless. The standing invite had proven a life-saver two or three times now. The day not long after his demotion *Acting* Controller Hatt had installed an old 1920s photograph of Edward and Henry waiting at their platforms at Knapford in that same station. Thomas had bunked off work that afternoon without notice and spent hours at the little shed, staring unseeing at the activity in the harbour.

On another day, when rumour went 'round that the Clone Directors were pleased with a candidate they spent the day interviewing, a

wrack-nerved Thomas had not felt quite able to face the Big Sheds. Instead he'd taken shelter with Neville and they'd talked late into the night, the tank engine's thoughts pleasantly distracted and grounded by hearing Neville's strange history. By the next day, before Thomas had time to be too worried, the candidate who had been offered the post had already rejected it.

The North Western fleet (stubbornly silent Gordon excepted) were frankly relieved. They were becoming resigned, however, to the prospect of the great change. Time will do that. Meanwhile Sir Topham gave the Clone Directors no peace, despite staying on as interim G.M. — he provoked them, week after week authorising some new expense, as if daring them to get a move on with his permanent removal. Thomas was sent to the fitters' yard for three days, realigning parts that had come out of joint during his Express misadventures. He, Rosie, Donald and Douglas all had new paint, after a drought of many a shabby year. Some new goods stock arrived, bright gleaming enticements for customers. The Big Shed was being deep-cleaned. Two express coaches were being refurbished. The men muttered about drunken sailors… a wry chuckle hidden in the back of their throats. The humour of despair. The Fat Controller might be going out — but he would do it in style. How could there be any doubt?

*

Weeks passed. The Board interviewed three more candidates. The second proposed selling the tracks to one buyer, the engines to a dealer, the rolling stock to another dealer, some half their properties to developers — leaving the NWR (after a suitable name alteration) a paper-pushing entity that simply took a cut of all those individual companies' contracts and negotiations among themselves. That man was sent packing with the rest.

Passenger receipts were up — the railway's drama seemed to have reminded some of the island that they *had* a railway, and that perhaps they'd better enjoy it while it lasted — but their goods orders remained anemic.

One morning Emily's usual midday branch goods was cancelled completely. She rolled into the yard, with the look of an engine who had time on her buffers… and no intention of hiding behind a water tower.

Thomas saw her coming.

He didn't know how he felt about Emily. Not these days. His feelings about her were now an *absence* of old feeling, and that was funny. Time had been — a mere couple months ago — that he could not lay eyes on her without a spike in his steam pressure, a clench of teeth, a scowl of disgust… and that had been on a good day. On a bad day (and there had been a lot of bad) he'd wanted to *shout*. He'd felt fury, spitting fury, a helpless rage.

He didn't feel that way now. Why, he wasn't sure. His only clue was maybe it was because of Duck. Duck, who was deep in some sort of funk that there didn't seem to be any shaking him out of. The way he rolled 'round the tracks these days, silent and self-contained, like he was trying not to be seen as he went about his work, the way he faded away completely when he was at leisure, his closed mouth and downcast eyes, it was all kind of… heartbreaking. It also seldom failed to put Thomas in mind of the wary, mouselike way Emily used to creep about the tracks. He felt very sorry for Duck, and while it couldn't be said he now felt sorry for Emily, he was aware that there was a fundamental similarity. He wasn't sure what to *do* about that, but it hadn't escaped his notice and his anger with her had simply fizzled out. And the truth was that it was a relief. It felt like a piece of shrapnel had been yanked out of him.

In the absence of that old anger, he found that there had always been, underneath it, that old terrifying depth of despair. The anger had always been a barrier between him and the panicked, miserable fantasy of running himself into an enormous slag heap and sobbing himself into oblivion. That feeling, too, was now different — it was at least reduced. Not gone, as his shield of anger was, but reduced.

Bearable. Shrinking.

And, since it now *could* be pushed aside, he made the effort. That slough seemed to always be creeping up on him on all sides, these days.

There was nothing to do but to keep shoving it back.

He was tired of being miserable.

"'Lo," he whistled.

Not a very robust whistle. And he had not yet brought himself to ever address her by name.

Yet even this quick whistle of greeting was enough to make her frown at him. "Hello," she said. Pointed, forward. Yet wary.

"Can I help you?"

She looked suspicious at the lack of sarcasm.

Thomas had to admit, he himself was a little surprised that he'd pulled it off.

"No, thank you." She was stiff and formal. "Driver and Fireman are going on break. Thought I'd wait here."

"Hottest spot in town," Thomas agreed.

Some sarcasm *did* bleed through his voice, that time.

There was no real bite in it, though, and Emily, fierce and undaunted as she was these days, would have barrelled right on ahead even if there had been. "Old tri-composites, bolsters… animal transport… this is the circus train, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He added, before he could help himself: "The boxvans over there with the logo on them are kind of the giveaway."

She gave him a hard stare, but Thomas only gave a little snort, rather pleased with himself. So pleased with himself, in fact, that he winked at her — just as if it had been Toby or Douglas that he'd scored off.

Then he got back to work.

He found that any sense of grievance that she'd invited herself over only to be so unsocialable quickly faded. It was a normal enough interaction. The other engines often waited here on break, sat around sizzling idleness and watched him work, and so long as they weren't looking for a fight Thomas didn't mind… and he would have been positively chipper, if ol' cement-mouthed Duck would come over one of these days and do the same.

Some quarter of an hour or more passed in this way, Thomas retrieving colourful rolling stock, digging two of the NWR's own horseboxes out of store by the client's request, parking them on the siding close by the road for the circus staff to load, positioning the publicity car behind the brake coach, and where had he left that

rubbish bogie bolster?...

"Boxes before bolsters," she warned.

"What?"

"Boxes before bolsters. If the bogie bolster is in front, the vans will jerk around the engine and bolster every — "

"Right, right." Thomas rolled his eyes.

"I'm just *saying*. If you do it the right way, the train will be safer."

"Have you ever thought," asked Thomas casually, "that if you weren't such a bossy boiler, engines would like you better?"

She glared. "I was *so* polite when I came here. It didn't help me out any. But at least I can prevent whoever's taking that lot from having their buffers bashed from here to — where does it go out to?"

"Their next show is in Crosby. And lay off. I've only been organising this stupid train since the dawn of the wireless."

"And it's always gone safely?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well… mostly." She looked very superior, and he added pointedly, "I don't think I can be blamed for the time the elephant escaped."

She looked as though she wouldn’t be too sure, about that. Thomas might have been annoyed, but the memory had come back to him and he couldn’t help starting to smile a bit over it.

"Its minder didn't own up. No one knew it was missing from the train. The Fat Controller — the first one — he had to send Henry out with some workmen to find out why nothing was able to pass through the Tidmouth Tunnel section. It sounds like it took his driver forever just to coax Henry into the tunnel because, well, it was dark in there, and they could hear the most awful noises. Well finally Henry tiptoes inside — only for a great elephant to push him backwards, right back into daylight! The men gave it water, and the beast snuffed it all up, only to whoosh it all over Henry's smokebox. Poor old sod… he didn't let us hear the end of it for days."

Emily looked aghast.

"They had an *elephant* back then?”

"Sure. Half a dozen of ‘em.”

"Ohmygod. Those poor animals.”

"'Course, the circus was a lot bigger then. People didn’t have the telly at home, you see. This was all a big to-do. Gordon and Henry used to quarrel over the train every year.”

She had raised the *other* eyebrow. "*Gordon* used to quarrel. Over a circus train?”

"Yeah…" It was strange to think about. He really had. Gordon and Henry had been friends for a while there, too… Thomas really couldn't remember, now, how they had drifted so far apart. Of course, he didn't say as much aloud because, this being Emily, she'd probably be able to tell him precisely why *despite not having even been there* and he'd be infuriated about how she managed yet again to be the world's greatest know-it-all. Instead, he deliberately avoided going down that road and glanced over at her. "Yeah, it used to be a big deal. Anyway. Do you want it?"

"Want what?" She was shocked — which to be sure was much more satisfying than giving her another chance to show off how she knew everything, and he was an oblivious little tank engine. "The train? This one?"

"Yeah. I could ask the Fat Controller to give it to you."

Slowly, her eyes narrowed. "Is this… an apology?"

Thomas sighed with a martyr's patience. "Do. you. want. it?"

"Yes!" she burst out. "I do, rather! I think an apology is the *very least* I'm owed!"

Thomas stared ahead. His gaze was softer than not, but after half a moment or so he only sighed again before looking at her with his funny, quizzical eyebrows that made him seem young even after the better part of a century of service. "Well… look, I can offer you a train."

They gazed at each other, warily sizing the other up.

"A *special* train," he added. Sweetening the offer. "I might even shunt it the way that you prefer…"

She continued to study him and Thomas had the uneasy feeling that this must be what it was like when the scrap-man was mentally calculating the value of your individual parts.

"Well," Emily said quietly, after a long moment, "I guess I'll take the train, then." Perhaps she was as surprised at the relief of her answer as he was because she immediately cleared her tubes in a self-important way that instantly made Thomas wish he had hands, so that he could flick something at her. "But it's not the way I *prefer*, it's the *correct* way."

"Eurghhh… you and Duck should get a shed…"

He'd meant it for a lighthearted grouse — an easy way to end a conversation that would surely only grow awkward if they let it go on. Already this was by far the longest chat they'd ever had. Why not end on a high note.

But she interrupted him, looking thoughtful, before he could toss a *well, bye for now* and be off.

"Is he all right, Duck?"

The relieved, slightly forced grin faded from Thomas's smokebox.

"Dunno…" He coughed. "He's not been the same since coming back, has he?"

"Well, no. But he *was* getting better. Until Gordon returned to work."

Thomas felt strangely defensive. Like falling back into an old habit. "So you think it's Gordon fault?"

She looked at him keenly. "It's possible, isn't it? I've finally got him off my tender. Henry's gone. He needs someone to pick on, that one."

Thomas knew the bitterness in her last few words was more than justified. Still — !

"I, I just don't think there's been any change. Duck's been like this since coming back."

"He was getting better," she insisted.

Stop acting like you're his friend! You barely know him! "Maybe." *I am not going to argue with her. I promised, I am* ***not*** *going to argue with her.* "Well… the Twins will look after him. They know him best."

Emily *tchah*'d. Though she blushed, a little, when Thomas side-eyed her.

"I like Donald and Douglas," she clarified, "I think they're very brave. But they're not good at this sort of thing. Comfort and all that."

"*I*'m not, either." He felt itchy and oppressed, with her looking at him.

Expecting more from him than he felt he had left in the tanks. "I think we just have to give him time."

"We have to try *something*." Emily's voice was hard and significant. "I mean to say… The passage of time alone has never solved anything for us before."

"No," agreed Thomas, weary. "But maybe we're due?"

She looked unconvinced. Unconvinced, fierce, and — *young*. Thomas had never really understood, not until this moment, just how new she really was. How much of his strength and fight was spent. How much of hers she still had.

"*You* could give him some assignments on your line," he suggested. "It's nice up there, sometimes it's a good pick-me-up. Edward used to — "

A long, tense, charged pause.

"Anyway," said Thomas.

"Good shout." Now it was Emily who avoided his eyes, keen to end the conversation. He reckoned it was just as well. "I'll look into that."

"Good." Thomas coughed. "And I'll ask — I'll ask the Fat Controller about that train for you."

"Thanks." She might have been embarrassed. Thomas wasn't sure why

she was embarrassed, but he liked her a bit better for it. "Bye, then."

"Bye — Emily."

*

He waited, afterwards, for the glow of self-satisfaction that he'd surely earned.

It didn't come. Until Gordon came in and needed his coaches borne away, Thomas felt restless, regretful — both that he'd not given her that apology, *and* that he'd given away a pleasant train he thought he might have easily wrangled for himself.

He couldn't even tell which he wished more. Which was vaguely annoying.

Trying to be better should come more easily, he thought. But he brightened, seeing Sir Topham Hatt emerge from his office. He was doing more than merely 'getting along' with Emily! Thomas picked up his puff, proud to ask for this magnanimous favour on her behalf.

You may or may not consider this much of a start. Gordon, however, knew *something* was up, right away. He came in with his morning train, the usual minute and a half late, and Sir Topham gave him a hard look over his clipboard, but was distracted by the sound of Thomas's eager whistle as he pulled up to the platform.

"Ah, Thomas," the Fat Controller said absent-mindedly, cutting him off before the tank engine could blurt out his request, "well done on beginning the preparations for that circus train so soon, you're well

ahead of schedule."

"Thank you, sir. I — "

"Let's plan to have Emily pull this one, shall we?" The Fat Controller was still reading something on his clipboard, only at this point glancing up at the engine. "I'll be at Vicarstown tonight, please pass the order on to her when she next comes in. I think she'll enjoy a trip on the main line."

The tank engine's frozen face fell. "Yes, sir."

Sir Topham was already turning away — the stationmaster was waiting on him, hands linked expectantly behind his back. (The Fat Controller spent a lot of extra time, these days, giving instruction to staff… fussing and hovering even as he delegated all sorts of duties that his office had never before relinquished.) "Be nice to her, Thomas," he reminded the engine.

"I — "

No dice. Gordon watched, through narrowed eyes, as Thomas smiled ruefully through a sigh.

"You wanted a pat on the buffers," observed Gordon, flat and uninterested… apparently. "You were playing nice and wanted to be told you were a good boy."

"No… Eurghh. Yes. Sod off."

"That replica climbed very high in his estimation, when you took me down."

"Yeah." The tank engine sighed again. "Oliver told me she would… guess he was right."

"I do hope it was worth it." Gordon said this in his most poisonous tone.

"Ah, well. S'a lot of responsibility, being thought of so highly. Maybe better her than me."

"Or than me?" Gordon asked archly.

"You're looking to quarrel," said Thomas. His thoughts seemed faraway and scattered and it seemed to render him unusually blasé. "Bored much? Why *have* you still got Oliver cut off, anyhow?"

"The little Westerner betr— "

"Betrayed you, yeah." Thomas rolled his eyes. "*I* betrayed you worse, and here you are still talking to me. Heh — I'll never be the Fat Controller's favourite. But I reckon I'm yours!"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Where's my competition?" the tank engine demanded, recovering from his dejected little slump with a mischievous grin. "You've frozen Oliver out. But not me. You couldn't even let me break down to win

your little stand-off with the Fat Controller — yeah, Gordon, I know all about that! I'm not so stupid as you think."

"You didn't think that up on your own," Gordon said, dismissive. "Someone else did and told it to you."

"Whatever. You caaaaare about me," Thomas teased. "You blinked first."

"The more fool I," agreed Gordon. His voice was one of those hunks of ice that used to be peddled about. "Abandoning your old friends to sleep over with ***the diesel***. Making nice with ***her*** for crumbs of Controller approval. Do you not comprehend that Sir Topham is being replaced! He can't save you."

The tank engine found himself only mildly annoyed. Somehow as the weeks went by Gordon was becoming only mildly annoying. It was a puzzle. "I know that. I'm not doing it to be *saved*."

"Ah. So you are cosying up to our fallen colleagues' replacements in exchange for nothing. You merely want… friends."

"Huh!" Thomas rolled his eyes. "You *would* say that like it's a bad thing."

"Friends are fickle."

"Your funnel's fickle."

"One grows all too tired," sighed Gordon, indifferent and lofty, "of watching silly heedless little engines run around blindly, fawn over humans who don't care two figs for them, and fall for empty promises. Very tired indeed…"

"Day of the peasant," Thomas agreed cheerily, releasing steam from his cylinders. "And then there's poor, noble, *suffering* Gordon who knows *everything*… with a dozen knives of *betrayal* sticking out the back of his boiler…" With a sardonic toot and roll of the eyes, he was chuffing away. "No one could *possibly* understand how his crushing burdens *weigh* on him… the *sorrows* that make him *late* with his train day in and day — "

He came to a stop, eyes widening.

He hadn't even cleared Gordon's tender.

"That. That is why you're late. Isn't it."

It would be *easier* to ignore this flash of understanding.

But then, Thomas never did think things through. He never avoided trouble. Slowly, he reversed…

Gordon was now somehow made of shadows. When he discerned that Thomas was puffing back beside him, his nostrils flared.

But his eyes were downcast.

The tank engine stopped, front buffers level, with a pronounced screech. "Wait," he said, frowning up at Gordon, gaze shocked, wondering, *horrified*, "you're… sad?"

Gordon gave the world's least impressed *hrmph* and looked off to the side, waiting for the tank engine to keep nattering on irreverently.

But his eyes, not-so-accidentally, landed on the newly mounted vintage photograph. Thomas's eyes followed his to that blown-up, colourised frozen frame of Twenties life before he could remove them — and Gordon couldn't all at once remove them, anyway.

Thomas bit his lip for a moment, looking worried, before blurting out in a quiet sort of way: "Cos, I mean, yeah, of — of course I think about them sometimes. A lot, maybe. But, like, at night mostly, if I can't sleep. Or during the day something might remind me of one or the other of them, and it does hurt, but you shake it off, you know, not like… so are you just, uh, brooding about them all the time, even during your trains?" There was the briefest pause, but Thomas seemed to realize he'd hit too near the truth and he hastened to lighten the mood: "Oho, *now* you miss the traitor with the feeble mind, and the traitor with the feeble firebox?" The teasing tone fell rather flat, given that the tank engine's eyes tried all the while to bore into Gordon's, with real dismay. "Cos that's, uh. I don't think that's exactly normal. Even if you'd actually been friends with them. That just doesn't sound… y'know. Maybe you should talk to someone about that." The tank engine hastened to clarify, "Like your driver."

Gordon grunted acknowledgment.

In truth, he would not have respected the tank engine, should Thomas have allowed himself to be drawn any deeper into his private affairs.

The great engine dearly loved a proper boundary.

"I do not care for them any more than they cared for me," he declared, certain that this made him sound grand and indifferent and not even a little sad. "Yet it is delusion to ignore where matters stand. Two of our old band have been reduced to parts. They've been replaced, forgotten. One slip, and we could wind up there all too soon. Indeed, in the end, it is every engine's doom."

Thomas blinked.

"Good talk, Gordon. An-y-way… the circus is about to take down the big tents. I plan to be parked there when my crew goes on break. So I can watch."

"Really?" snorted Gordon. "You cannot talk seriously about The State of The World for ten seconds without changing the subject to *clowns?*"

"Maybe clowns *are* The State of The World," Thomas teased. "Feels that way sometimes, doesn't it? But then again, first thing tomorrow, the Fat Controller is letting me take a slow goods all the way to Vicarstown. I can stay and help Rosie the rest of the day."

"Hrmph. I hate to burst your bubble — "

"You do not hate it. You live for it."

" — but a slow goods will take you all day. You'll not get to titter and clank about with your little girlfriend for very long."

"No, Gordon, a slow goods *used* to take all day. Now our railway's in

decline, haven't you noticed? It's a way faster job than it was in nineteen-thirty-whatever. And Rosie's not my girlfriend, we barely even know each other. But she seems all right. Stressed out, but all right. I'm looking forward to seeing her again."

"There was a time," rumbled Gordon, "that you wanted nothing more than to get out of shunting Vicarstown. Now here you are, scheming and conniving to get over there again."

"I s'pose that's so. Sort of. But what's your point?"

"You're never satisfied, little Thomas."

"You're a fine one to talk. The biggest and the best, moping about a vulgar little branch line engine and a vulgar great counterfeit."

"I am not moping. I am Contemplating the Future and what it holds for us all. You wouldn't understand."

"I understand that you're moping."

"You're a traitor," grunted the big engine, with something of the calm of despair. "You replace your friends as quickly as humans replace their machines. You are not to be relied upon."

Thomas grinned. "Don't push me, Gordon," he stage-whispered. "Annoy me too much, and… I might make friends with *the replica*."

"I don't doubt it," said Gordon, in the tones of deepest disdain.

Thomas tooted, but before he'd got quite off his brake he stopped short again. Looked up into the great engine's face once more.

"You know, all my life I wanted to be important — like you. I've envied you till I was sick over it. And now I've had a taste of it and I found out — what I *really* wanted all along was *friends*. And, like, I did have to be important first! I had to win some respect before I could make too many friends — it couldn't happen when I was jealous of everyone and they all looked down on me. But. I dunno, you've been important always so maybe for you it's the opposite. You'd get on better if you were just a little less important. Not a whole lot! But a little… It's worth it. It really is."

Gordon was speechless.

Not that Thomas gave him more than half a second's pause to find speech. He whistled hastily. "Anyroad! That ten seconds is up. I'm going to go find someone to talk to about clowns. Bye."

*

Emily was right, Thomas concluded later, as he tried to draw Duck into futile conversation less, and observed him more. (He was absolutely not going to think about Gordon. If he did his smokebox would split in two. Fancy surviving all those ill-judged heroics with the Wild Nor'wester just to fall apart because Gordon had to go and have an emotion!)

Duck — Duck! the engine that had once been able to talk even long-tongued Thomas into the ground! — was not recovering his old spirit. And he *had* spoken, a little more, that first week he'd been turned out the Works. More than he was now. Hadn't he and Thomas had that

long talk that evening in the Big Shed? Emily's words made Thomas remember, now, that moment when he'd seen the surface of Duck ice over. He couldn't remember what had caused it, but the more he tried to make sense of it the more he agreed with Emily about Duck's decline. His decline, and its timing… that chat had been the same day Gordon returned to work…

Cinders and ashes. If she turned out to be correct that Gordon was secretly having a go at Duck, Thomas *would* kill her. And then he'd kill Gordon, but worse. And then Sir Topham would have to kill him… it would be a whole messy thing. He really, really hoped she was wrong.

He wound up asking Donald and Douglas about it. He'd hesitated at first, fearing that raising so delicate a concern might spark a conflagration that got quite out of his control, much like his asking everyone about why the Fat Controller had gone and brought a diesel had led to the freezing-out of Neville.

But as it turned out he'd had little to fear. Far from jumping at any hint of trouble, the Twins categorically assured him that Gordon was most definitely not doing anything to Duck on the sly. *They* had seen to that.

Thomas took the gleam in their eye as answer enough. "Uh, good then," he'd said nervously. "Just, uh. Don't get yourselves in trouble."

"Nae trouble," they said — almost in chorus. (He hated when they did that.) "We were *authorised*."

"Yeah, well. Fat Controller won't be able to authorise much, soon."

They only scoffed at him.

The fresh coats of paint had given Donald and Douglas even more new heart than Thomas. They were in blue now, like Duck. Rosie was also in blue, agreeing to join the trend after being told the Works no longer carried her custom colours, and she looked a bit awkward in it, seeming to find it suited her ill. The Twins, however, seemed to like their new colour quite as well as their old ("*Noo* we're a proper Little Caley!") and the satisfaction of having Duck back, safe in body at least, seemed to be stimulant enough for them to face their old difficulties with peppery cheer.

"Who stuffed sich a fool notion down yer chimney, anyway?" demanded Douglas… more or less amiably.

"Emily."

"Och." Donald raised his eyebrows. "So it's 'Emily' noo, is it?"

"Aye, I dinnae ken the name," said Douglas. "Who cuild the wee tank engine be meaning, Donnie?"

"Shut up. I told you," Thomas added, for Donald's sake, "I *told* you I wouldn't hurt her."

Donald only snorted, declining to return to the sobriety of those strange uncertain days. "Guid fur ye, laddie, tha' engine cuild ainly crush ye under her twae Ferris wheels wi'oot breaking into her steam reserves."

"And you?" Thomas scowled. The Twins teasing him was better than their old distance and grumbling. But *sometimes*… "We have the exact same tractive effort!"

"Aye," conceded Donald, with a wink. "I wuildnae try her."

This did Thomas in. He had to crack a smile.

Duck did try her, though. At least, when Emily had produced a pleasant half-day's timetable to offer him on her line, Duck had declined, suggesting that she give it to someone else, maybe Thomas? Thomas, when he heard, was all at once touched, frustrated, and above all entertained — Emily, who hated to have her ideas stymied and must have doubly hated *this* counter-offer, locking metaphorical buffers with Duck, the most impossible and immovable engine on the rails. Had to have been a sight! A lively row would have been good for them, too, he thought — good for them both. Of course Duck did not react enough to allow it. By all accounts he'd only waddled quietly away. Thomas, for the first time ever, felt a little sorry for Emily. She'd tried.

*

So they had to leave Duck to his closed-mouth stony solitude, and trust to whatever time could do for him. Thomas exchanged wordless whistles with him and sometimes, when watching Duck chuff away with his trains, ached with wishing Edward were here. He would have understood the mystery.

But Thomas could see for himself, watching Duck as the weeks passed, that the Twins were correct to rule out Gordon as the cause… he and Duck avoided each other completely, like two repulsing magnets. And Thomas was terribly relieved by this. It would have been too awful a letdown, to find Gordon hurting someone *again*.

It was strange, how much pain he'd anticipated from the prospect.

And yet it wasn't strange.

Because that was another old burden that had ceased to weigh on him:

His concern for you is bigger than his ego.

Almost the very morning after Duck said those words, Thomas had already found himself, against his will, coming to believe them.

And so the bitterness had gone out of his station pilot duties. It wasn't that he now *liked* them — but he'd been trying to, this time 'round. They were still dull and uninspired, he still looked for any bit of company or change — but his job was no longer intolerable cosmic injustice.

There was a reason he was stuck at the Big Station. Oh, he had *very* mixed feelings about it. But it was a reason.

He was too afraid to see you break…

He'd managed to not face it head-on, he'd still half-disbelieved it… until the day he'd seen that crack in Gordon's armour. When he realised that Gordon was sad, Gordon was devastated even. Gordon could *bleed*.

If Gordon could really mourn Henry and Edward so deeply — and unfortunately what Thomas had seen in his face did not allow for any doubt — then Duck's revelation was not so unthinkable.

You matter to him more.

Oh, maybe he ought to have come to loathe the Fat Controller and Gordon, as those early days passed, and each week he grasped a little more clearly how they had played tug-of-war with him. Quite a real, very physical, very dangerous game. They'd nearly torn him in two.

But he couldn't hate his controller. For those two weeks at least, he had needed Thomas. And it remained true that *he* needed the Fat Controller. A sorry, embarrassing position for a piece of machinery to be in, but that was what it was.

Anyway, Thomas *was* needed.

Gordon needed him.

It still didn't make sense. It still wasn't fair. He was again caged at the Big Station, and, worse yet, he was beginning to feel… obligated. If the door were opened on a new opportunity, he'd hesitate, he'd actually *look back*…

He was now even more bound to the big engine than he'd been all those years ago, when he'd been left coupled on the back of that express.

Gordon needed him.

It wasn't who Thomas would have chosen. The great gasbag himself. Mr. Where-Is-My-Shunter. Good ol' This-Is-The-Day-of-The-Peasants.

But Gordon needed him.

And, well. Probably Edward wouldn't have chosen to spend his first war on a foreign backwater with a little tank engine who stirred up confusion on the daily… and who pestered him at the rate of a hundred questions an hour. Toby certainly hadn't been defending Emily to him all this time (nor, it was rumoured, now sometimes visiting her shed) because he found her inexperienced bossiness so congenial. Donald hadn't worked his goods to Barrow that night fondly hoping to encounter a desperate stowaway, whose pleas would compel him to risk the safety of himself and his brother against the possible wrath of a controller already known to abruptly send engines away.

Perhaps it was different for humans… (although, maybe not. Probably it had been no Fat Controller's original dream to manage a fleet of cast-offs and oddities and relics… and it would make sense, to find a Fat Controller unusual in this way, for his engines had always felt in him — despite his mistakes — a sort of affinity that they found in few other humans)... Well then, perhaps it was different for *most* humans. Thomas couldn't know for sure.

But engines were built to be useful.

So perhaps it was inevitable that they could never hate anyone who really needed them.

*

Fast-forward…

Twice upon a time, on a medium railway on a medium island off the north-west coast of England, there was a little fleet of steam engines. To look them over, you wouldn't at first think there was much to them. Old-fashioned, tired-looking things — albeit one after the other was turned out each week freshly-painted, in splendid nick. A rum thing. They ought to have been preparing for the scrapyard. Instead they looked to be unfurling the colourful banners of war.

The summer was wearing down, and strife among them was on a precipitous decline. Among themselves, and with outsiders, too. Busses and lorries still often tied to jeer at them, but these days more of the engines than not idly jeered back, hardened and cheerful and unafraid. This did do much to reduce the amount of road vehicles who wanted to have a go. Construction machines looked on them in bemusement, and, increasingly, a sort of liking. "You're nicer than you used to be!" a red front-loader told the station pilot at Tidmouth, not too long ago. The tank engine looked cross for a moment, then had to snort, face lightening. "You really just say whatever's on your mind, don't you Jack?" The ships at the harbour were of a similar mind. The little puffers had been taciturn and gruff for so long. These days they again wanted to try to shout conversation. They had questions about the outside world.

Perhaps their curiosity was down to a desire to bring back an offering for the night's common entertainment. Nowadays the Big Shed was a magnet for engines who have to come rather out of their way — which they tended now to do all nights, not only in times of crises. The specially-out-of-time-looking 'single' eight-footer stayed over rather often now, albeit she only seemed to come when the identical Scottish engines or (on rare occasion) the little steam tram were there. The leased Bulleid freight engine stayed over on Saturday nights, too — reserved, and often tongue-tied when the others asked him things; yet not, after the first couple visits, looking as though he were there under compulsion. His wary sidelong glances at the great Gresley thoroughbred in the corner of the shed faded, as the latter remained distant and lofty and neutral. The twin engines approved of this weekly visitor, for they were again raising a chorus on special days

and they deemed him "the ainly sassenach of an engine who cuild sing in tune." And what a useful audience the newest engine made for the others to rehash the better and funnier memories of their shared years.

The leaves began to turn. The Board finally found a new controller.

The express engine and the station pilot were the first to know: The candidate had arrived at headquarters off the morning Nor'wester. They knew him now by sight, and their eyes met wordlessly. The tank engine bore off the coaches and swiftly returned to platform two, to wait in silence with the great train engine, who did not make one move towards water and coal.

It was clear when the Candidate and the Clone Directors finally emerged. They headed into town on foot, rather than doubling back to seek a train, but there were smiles and handshakes all around.

So the two engines knew.

For a full five minutes, nothing but road traffic chuffing, and beeps in the distance. Somewhere in an unseen part of the station a toddler wailed.

"Right, then." Thomas at last sighed deeply. "Well… congratulations. At least you'll be pleased. After all that — you'll be Big Yin again."

"It is a miraculous opportunity," said Gordon numbly. "I had no moves left, so long as Sir Topham remained at the helm. From today forward, I have options." He heard Thomas ease off his brake and cut him off. "Thomas."

The tank engine raised his eyebrows. He might have expected Gordon to gloat, but it was nowhere in his tone. Indeed Gordon had never addressed him this way before — no imperiousness, no pomp, no *"little"*.

It gave the simple word urgency.

"Erm. Yeah?"

"We should form an alliance, you and I."

Improbably, somehow, Thomas's triangular eyebrows climbed higher.

"Alliance. United we stand, toge — "

"Yes, you damp muppet, I know what an alliance is, I've lived through twice as many world wars as you did," Thomas snapped.

Gordon's brows knit.

"Haven't you seen," he growled, "don't you finally understand that no one can be relied upon? I tried to tell you that Sir Topham never cared as much for you as you did for him. But you mattered more even to him than you will to this newcomer. Now look here, you and I have withstood many a decade of turmoil and threat. There is nothing else we have to trust in, if not each other. You *cannot* let your touchy small engine pride blind you to this reality. You need protection! And — I want to protect you," added Gordon, his frustration snapping off all at once into a hoarse, almost broken note. "Can you not see that I would not have you taken away, too?"

Thomas gazed back a long moment.

"I'm scared, too," he said at last. "I can't stand by and watch someone else go again. It'd finish me off…"

"*I* shall not be lost!" burst out Gordon, indignant. "I have *influence* once more. The Board ousted *Topham Hatt* in my defence. No one is sending me away."

"Yeah," said Thomas quietly, gazing again at the rails. "That's a comfort."

"Then let us form the alliance."

"... No."

The silence that followed was deadly.

Gordon raised one eyebrow and sneered, even as Thomas exhaled a deep, slow breath. "I see. You would choose your new little friends over me."

"Don't. Don't do that *thing* where you make this about choosing."

"It is unavoidable! We are likely to soon face changes that will make the losses we have endured thus far seem a mere prologue. We do not have the luxury of avoiding hard choices."

Thomas squinted, with a wrinkle of his nose.

"Who's been avoiding hard choices? Not me. It hasn't been *easy*, you know, making nice with the others. But — I *am* forming alliances. That what I've been doing ever since — I want to be allies with *everyone*."

"That is not what an ally is," sneered Gordon. "It is the — the — the *particularness* that gives the relationship any meaning at all."

"I'm not bandying words with you, I know you know more of 'em than I do." Thomas sounded grumpy. Like they were speaking of nothing more important than the arrangement of the evening train. "All I know is I could never choose you over the others. No more than I could ever choose any of them over you!" he added, hasty. "You're my oldest — I ***guess*** the word is *friend*. But if you want to be allies? Then you're in alliance with all *my* allies, too." The corners of his mouth twitched downwards, disappointed, when he looked at Gordon's face. And the little tank engine chuffed off.

"That will never work!" harrumphed the great engine.

Thomas didn't respond.

"You lot don't understand anything about handling the *politics* of railway management!"

No one and nothing responded.

"You have no idea how precious this refuge is that you are so lightly throwing away! — *Ugghh*." Gordon pushed steam into his cylinders, and gave chase.

Thomas raised his eyebrows, when he found Gordon hastening level with him by *running backwards*. But he didn't slow down.

"What does a fleet-wide alliance do, then," demanded Gordon, with a sneer, "if any one of our number is condemned?"

"Work stoppage, I s'pose."

"That was not successful when *I* did it."

Thomas neither sped up or slowed his journey forward. "Yeah, because you had no allies. If all of us stop — even if all of us except you — "

"That would work for as long as the New Controller cannot replace us all," Gordon pressed, grunting in awkward pursuit. For him running backwards was usually a matter of life and death. "What if he is successful at his post? What if, five years from now, it is viable for the Board to authorise funds to replace us *all* with diesels? The threat of a work stoppage would no longer prevent the New Controller doing anything."

"We'd still have to do it, though," said Thomas doggedly.

"Even for *the replica*?"

"... I think so," said Thomas quietly. "Things would be pretty bad if it was on Emily's account anyway, she's the newest of us."

Gordon's face twisted. "But what if it were like the last time? Not a clear condemnation. What if she simply needed major repairs, and they were delayed indefinitely? Would you still risk so much for *her*, even then?"

"I'd do whatever Duck thinks." Thomas gulped and added, "I hope. I hope I'd be as brave. But he knew the right thing to do last time. And I wouldn't let him face it alone again. It's not worth it."

"What if an electric tram was brought in to supersede that little J70?" demanded Gordon. "As that Bulleid was brought in to improve on Henry's work? Ought we have made a stand then?"

"I — I don't know. Maybe?"

"Maybe, he says. It's not good enough. You speak of hope; what is your *plan?*"

"I don't KNOW!" said Thomas, exasperated. "But it's not *my* plan, anyway. I'd talk to the others! I'm not the only one who's learned some hard lessons. In the future we're going to stand together. That will mean talking over these things! And not just taking the easy way out with jokes and rumours and rubbish, like we did with Neville." He came to a stop. "We did that because we were scared. I'm dead tired of being scared. If I wind up in the scrapyard, so be it. My family faced it, your family faced it, Edward and Henry faced it. We're not too weak to follow them, once we really have to. I'm just — not going to spend what's left of my life hiding, and hope the next fellow gets it worse than me. That's the only plan! Are you hearing me? You think we little engines are wasting time chatting and having fun but — I think that's what becoming allies *looks* like. We have to practice with

little things so that we're ready when it's time to talk about the big things. And *now* it's time! So — join us."

Gordon stared.

"Join us," the great engine repeated, with a scoff. "If it were I that was damaged, those Scottish clods would stand by me?"

"If you stopped being a twat. Why not? Donald and Douglas have frames of steel."

"We have… differences."

"You have similarities, is what you have."

"Or what about that sly, scheming replica — "

"Do you know how ridiculous you sound still saying that? Her name is *Emily*. And, I dunno. Ask her. She may surprise you — " Thomas briefly interrupted his own cross little speech with a chuckle. "They only ever made one of her, that's for sure. But just — just *try*. Come and talk, that's all. *Please*. I don't want to reject you at all, Gordon! Just come and stand with *all* of us."

His voice wobbled at the end; his eyes were wide with entreaty. For that moment he again looked exactly like the impetuous little shunter Gordon had first met all those years ago.

The great engine snorted, as if disgusted, and pulled away.

*

Rewind…

It was their third week there when the men approached Edward — the men being the Mangy Controller, and a skinny, gawky cousin who worked for him. So, this was it. Edward, with nothing more to give, regarded them limply.

He was not surprised to be the subject of a careful inspection but he was confused that they conducted it with a can of what he first thought was paint. It turned out to be a clear, thick rust preventative and over the course of the next hour the Cousin slathered it on him in many different patches, saying something about the weather hopefully holding for a day or two.

Yes, he was confused although — resigned to the end — he should not have been all that curious except that the effect proved dramatic.

At first the jostle and flaking of rust had made him grind his teeth. But as the sealant was liberally applied, Edward gave a little gasp.

The pain faded.

The pain faded. The painful itchiness that had been nearly driving him mad for years — gone.

At first the abrupt absence was its own breathtaking form of pain. Then he grew used to it. Numbness. Nothing.

The relief was stunning.

At some point the Mangy Controller, busy though he was, saw his expression and gave something of a smirk. "Better, inn'it?" He paused, then shrugged a shoulder when the engine said nothing. "Too little too late of course. I don't know what your controller was faffing about for, d'you?"

It smelled quite bad, of course. The other vehicles nearby pulled faces and a yellow lorry hacked and gagged dramatically until the Mangy Controller bawled at him to shut up or he'd remove his face before nightfall.

The man had a clipboard with him where he seemed to have been making notes during his scrutiny. After this he climbed up onto the footplate and spent some time up there. Edward couldn't really feel him. The fresh absence of pain left him in a sort of woolly state. Within it the men's conversation meant nothing. Nor did the stares and occasionally the glowers of the other vehicles in his line of sight.

Indeed the Mangy Controller may have needed to ask him twice by the time Edward registered the question.

"These build plates correct?"

It took a moment, to return to the world of time. "Yes? At least, I don't know why they wouldn't be."

"Crovan's Gate and Atlas Works?"

"Yes."

"1925. And ***1896***?"

"Yes. That's right." There was an edge in the old engine's voice that mightn't have been there, if the lorry and van nearest to him hadn't just then burst into soundless cackles.

There was a pause. Then the rustling of a toolbox. Then some futile pulling and tugging.

Then the Mangy Controller told his cousin to go bring a drill bit.

Much to the cousin's disgust, the Mangy Controller had managed the thing with screwdrivers by the time he'd come back.

Edward was numb once more, though in a different way. It was beginning, then. Some while back, Toby had shunted him out of Tidmouth shed long enough to retrieve his tender and bear it away somewhere — doubtless no one had wanted to give Thomas the order to do it. Edward had known then, despite a facile reassurance from Toby's driver, that he'd never get his tender back and the knowledge had weighed on him, but at least that was taken from him to be of some use to the others. There was something so *trivial* about taking away his builders' plates.

Thus, he was surprised when the Mangy Controller climbed down

with them. "I'll keep these locked up," he said. "So they don't grow little feet and walk away."

"Wheels, coz," joked the equally mangy cousin. "Little wheels…"

"I don't understand," said Edward. They hardly seemed worth separating and smelting down on their own. "What earthly use could those be to anyone?"

"Oh, collectors. The older one would fetch a pretty penny at auction," said the Mangy Controller. He saw Edward's expression and may have taken bafflement for dismay. "Don't you worry. I'll keep them on hand while you're still in one piece."

The Cousin raised his eyebrows as he re-packed the drill bit and gathered up his other tools, but said nothing.

"Well," acknowledged the Mangy Controller, "I can only give you till end of autumn, lad. Even with the sealant. Rust has already eaten up a fair bit and after a winter without shelter there won't be good metal enough for me to come out ahead on your purchase." Edward might have told the man that he didn't care, indeed he'd prefer to have it done sooner than later, but the Mangy Controller was well and away and could only have been stopped by flatly interrupting him. "Already we'll have to put on a fresh coat every month. No, it's not looking good for you, old thing. If the rust weren't so bad, now. But chin up. I'll make a few calls. We're open for visitors every Sunday, after Easter. Put on your company manners. You do *know* how to talk, when you want to — I've heard you at it."

With that he turned and followed his cousin's slow progress through the junk and tall grass of the yard.

"Visitors?" said Edward blankly.

He was more or less asking the air. The vehicles nearby had never yet said a helpful word to him. Now he noticed, after another second's bemusement, that they were almost all looking at him with active *malice*.

"Don't get your hopes up, old iron," said a dented combine harvester, as if indifferent.

"None of the big spenders are going to want *you*."

They were all clearly gearing up to have a collective go at him but Edward was indifferent. There was a sense of deja vu. He'd been the target of a ring of bigger, newer vehicles boasting of their superior fortune before. This time, he was resigned to his fate. Perhaps that was what allowed him to see all too clearly that this was probably sour grapes. He didn't see what exactly gave them a cause for envy, but he supposed that, down in this hell, your builders' plates being worth a little to some collector was better than nothing. It occurred to him that he'd never heard of a single diesel being preserved.

"Steam *is* popular," sighed a Class 110 motor unit, confirming Edward's thoughts. He was the only one not glaring. He only looked aside, rather glum.

"Pah! *He*'s all but reduced to the elements already."

"If he were important, he'd not be here!"

"And lookit the state of 'im."

"There's not enough money in Barclays to restore *you*," sneered the yellow lorry.

"Right," agreed the Class 110 trailer car, with a sniff. "Even if anyone *had* ever heard of you. You're a dead loss, even the scrap-man can barely make a profit on you. Now, your *friend*…"

She looked over with some appreciation towards the distant little harbour, where Henry, steam pluming proudly, appeared to be sniping with the crane.

"Now that's a steam engine who might have a chance," admitted her motor unit. It sounded like the words were wrenched out of him.

"Yeah," said the van on cinderblocks. "Wonder what *he* used to do…"

For the third time that morning, Edward was stunned. He joined them in watching Henry, and he never even heard them when they lost interest and resumed taunting him.

He had something new to think about.

*

Fast-forward

More. No, more than that.

How far are we going?

Till we catch up. Don't be shy. Little further... no, too far.

Here?

Why not? Good as place to end as any.

Wait — we're looking for the ending?

An *ending.*

What the heaven does that mean?! Where *does the story end?*

Wherever we choose to call an end.

...

Ah, but maybe that's too far. Go back a bit.

*

Now

Tonight the homing-in at Tidmouth Sheds is once again sombre, once again particularly well-attended. Even the little station pilot from clear the other end of the railway, a bit gangly in an awkward adolescent way in her new paintwork, is excused late in the evening to tag along on the Wild Nor'wester, while the forgetful leased diesel is brought back in as coverage. She is the last to enter the very full shed; the Bulleid eases backwards to make room for her in his berth, which she enters gazing, with her own brand of timid eagerness, around the intense, strained, but civil talk of all the older engines — and of the young 'single' wheeler, who is as much in the thick of the discussion as any blue engine. More than most, indeed. Voices are low. Faces are chalky and pale.

Yes, the tension is palpable. But the crews do not linger, tonight. It is very clear that, this time, their charges are waiting for them to get on. The engines eye each other again and again, with much hanging in the air unsaid, waiting to be shaped into words.

The Single's crew, again, are the ones dragging their feet. This time it does not seem so much that they fear what the other engines will say to her once she is locked in with them. They're more nervous that, if provoked past her limits — and she's already on edge, already side-eying the great Gresley — she might somehow jump her track and tear another engine's face off.

They double-check her brake and fire, just to make sure that if it does somehow happen that they cannot be blamed, and bid her good night.

The shed rumbles with engine conversation some time after they leave. It's awkward and tense and veers towards frustration, but the talk remains muted. For some reason there is an old tramway coach and a 16-ton brakevan lurking in the back — *This involves them, too!* the Great Western autotank had said stubbornly, when the big engine

objected — and although the rolling stock do not in fact speak up, their presence seems to ensure that disagreement does not spill outside bounds of civility. Eyes find their targets with sideways suspicion, teeth are gritted, but when the discussion threatens to turn its most turbulent the most dull-eyed engine of all breaks his silence. His words are very quiet, and they bring the volume back down. The others are keen to listen, to ask him nervous questions… to build, as best they can, on what he says…

There is only one thing on which everyone can agree: There is little point staying up too late. Tomorrow is a big day.

One by one they drop off.

*

And now you can see this autumn morning's dawn, sky over the Big Sheds bright and clear. An iridescent convertible, silver and azure, is eating up the last mile of its approach.

Seated in front are a stolid driver, face set deeply behind a cap, and a gangly, chinless fellow weighed down with several clipboards and a binder in his lap. In the back the railway's new controller, neck craning around to glimpse the shoreline, is asking the old controller whether they ever thought about expanding that dinky little harbour back in the Fifties, when rationing came to an end? New shipping routes were in great demand then; surely an investment would have paid itself off quickly. Missed opportunity, that.

It is not clear whether the young man ever saw the Fifties. A vein is beginning to pulse into visibility below the previous controller's hat.

When they park, the new controller disembarks from the convertible

with a swagger that suggests that they have just skidded to an artfully angled stop although, in fact, the driver pulled into park in the ordinary, boring way.

For all the younger man's panache and energy, the old controller (after, it must be said, a bit of a tussle with his door handle) manages to pre-empt him to the turntable. A pannier tank in fresh blue paint has already been moved strategically onto it. The new controller raises his eyebrows, incredulous but amused, when the old controller climbs up on the engine's running board; then the eyes of him and every human and engine look to him expectantly. *Well?* The new controller follows with an air of humouring children.

As it happens, he's shod in wing-tips and does almost lose his footing on the ladder. He recovers, but they notice. And he knows they notice. He snorts with easy temper; defies them with a bit of a theatrical pose, once he is safe and splendid on the engine's front; and inquiries with authoritative casualness if this is the lot of them, then?

Hatt's expression is quiet and resigned… but his shoulders are still squared. "Indeed," he says. "I have the honour to present to you the finest lot of engines in Britain."

"Hm!" The new controller smiles. It doesn't reach his eyes, but those eyes have no malice in them. They are amused, indulgent. Uninterested. He glances affectedly over his clipboard. If he were looking harder, he'd take more notice of the tight formation. Somehow, the entire fleet fits onto the six tracks, half of the berths having been doubled or tripled up. If he'd known engines' body language (he doesn't) he'd see that this is the equivalent of everyone holding hands as they face him. Everyone is shined to the highest polish, and keen, lively, world-wary eyes gaze directly at him from every face. "High praise. No surprise, coming from the source. But surely *one* of you must be bringing up that average, eh?"

He throws this off in idle, sporting jest — on his way to all but wink at

the great, graceful Flying Scotsman duplicate who rests off to the leftmost side. But before his eyes reach there, he has to blink, almost pushed back a step, at a collective murmured chorus of ***No, sir***.

And so by the time his eyes reach his target, the new controller's eyebrows have risen half-mast. They do not lower one mite when the great engine gazes back at him with stodgy seriousness… with his old eyes, which one single, solitary, devastating defeat have now softened into something far more resilient and unflagging than pride.

"I think you'll find, sir," he rumbles, "that we work best as a team."

The new controller is made of poise and confidence. His reaction is a flicker.

But, if your eyes are very good, you can see him swallow.

Chapter End Notes

cue outro music

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Chapter 14: Epilogue(s)

Chapter Summary

After everything you've endured, it's the hope that might break you.

Chapter Notes

If you are looking for closure, absolutely do not read these. Especially don't read the final scene.

If, however, you simply want to see a bit more, and from a less Thomas-centric angle… well, go on, then. ;)

I included some quotes to precede each "scene" with relevant context, however I really can't emphasize enough how much you should also go and re-read all of *at least* chapters 4 and 8 of It's A Splendid Life if you want the full effect.

Huge thanks to JZ1 for beta reading!

“I hate him,” Emily said, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “He’s been like this ever since I arrived and he’s turned everyone against me[...] Even Oliver can’t stand me now and we got on so well when he first arrived.”

- *It's A Splendid Life, chapter 7*

The Wrong Way?

“You really need to quit all that moping.”

Duck stared, as he bloody well might. This was so abrupt, so blatantly inappropriate a greeting from *Oliver* of all engines that he barely even knew. The autotank had just backed up next to him, interrupting Duck's rest (*rest* — not mope, thank you very much), which he had deliberately chosen to take by the tower that had developed a case of hard water since he'd been gone. These days the other engines steered clear of it, and it had become Duck's preferred spot on the weekdays that his timetable had him taking a mid-morning break at Knapford. Donald had joined him once for an excruciating half-hour of stiff small talk, and Thomas had needed a couple more tries before he learned his lesson, but eventually even he had learned that Duck really had nothing to offer as far as good company and no longer arranged his break to coincide with the pannier's.

Now here was Oliver (wasn't he supposed to be on the Brendam branch right now?), frowning thunder at him. "Hello to you too, Oliver," Duck said, enunciating each word pointedly.

"You *do* talk." The autotank settled himself comfortably in a cloud of steam right next to him, and hissed his next observation to the sky. "He even knows my name…"

Duck frowned, slowly matching Oliver's energy… but nothing was said for a while. They alike (Oliver's brows furrowed, Duck blank-faced) watched the Fat Controller and some staff alight to the great Knapford signalbox. This was still summertime, a couple months yet before the Board would bring in his replacement, which gave the Fat Controller plenty of lead time. He was often heard, lately, to prepare offices that had once reported to his own to now communicate with each other directly. Oliver watched the scene with glum tension. What emotion Duck felt, he could not have told you even if you'd demanded of him.

"You're not going to say anything," Oliver groused at last, "huh?"

The nerve of some engines. "You ought to consider doing the same.

You interrupted my *rest*."

Oliver rolled his eyes. "You're always 'resting'. That excuse has worn a bit thin, mate!"

A clean conscience on this point allowed Duck to meet the accusation with a fierce frown of his own. His need for rest was true so far as it went, even if it wasn't perhaps the whole truth behind why he had been so remote. He *was* tired, though. He had simply been so out of condition — it had been years since he'd pulled all-that-heavy or all-so-fast trains, and for Beckermet scrapyard in particular his work had never been difficult in the physical sense. Now he found that each train (and Duck *was* now functionally the entirety of the main line goods link) wiped him out and left him needing a good while in between to recover; in that sense, at least, it was fortunate that the NWR was not so hard-worked these days as to generally prevent Duck from having the time he needed between jobs to build up his steam again. He would have let the Fat Controller send him straight back to the mainland before he'd ever have asked for any relief. Henry had sent him back here in his place believing that Duck could help his railway move the needle on their financial situation and Duck could have never agreed to the swap without vowing to himself that he could and would produce the result that Henry was sacrificing himself for.

If that weren't enough, he was still somewhat dazed by the care he'd been given at the Works the day he had arrived on the island. It had not, indeed, been a complete overhaul — they hadn't the time nor, likely, the funds to spare for that — but the CME had all but fussed over him, the Fat Controller had authorised new paintwork on the spot despite that delaying his return to work by a whole day and a half even at their moment of crisis, and Duck had left the Works feeling better than he'd had in so long. It was an opportunity so many hundreds of engines he'd shepherded through the valley of the shadow of death had wished for in vain, and Duck could not have helped feeling that he was spitting on all their corpses if he complained about the not-especially-demanding timetables he was now working. So he didn't. But isolating himself did prevent him from revealing his weariness, as well as offering him the best chance to recover his

strength.

It also (so it seemed to him) gave him the best odds of prolonging this period of strange, unlooked-for peace.

He recognised it for a temporary lull. Clear skies before nightfall, and the return of the bombers.

Maybe he hadn't come here expecting anything like it, even for a spell. Maybe at one point he'd been braced for nothing but strife and condemnation.

But — now it was delayed — he didn't dare disturb things.

During all this glum reflection, Duck had shown no curiosity about Oliver's thoughts and motivations for showing up and harrumphing at him. As it turned out, Oliver didn't need the help.

"It's driving your friends straight mad, you still not talking," the autotank announced. "It's rubbish. You owe them more than this. I mean, I *get* it, you had a hard time on the mainland — "

"Do you 'get' it?" muttered Duck. Oliver's words sounded sympathetic (which was irksome, in itself), but it was remarkable how his *tone* was anything but.

"I mean, I gu-ess." Oliver was grudging about it. "It's what Douglas and Donald say. (Which is WEIRD, by the way. This isn't LIKE them.) They say you need time. But *I* say, time's run out. *They* may still have some patience they scavenged up from somewhere-or-'nother but *I'm* fresh out. You could at least TRY."

Duck sighed irritably, through his teeth. He was offended – and he wished he could feel *more* offended. Yet, however flagging and fading, he was still himself. He was too fundamentally fair not to see that the other Western engine (miraculously?) had a bit of a point.

He'd been skulking too long, praying for the storm to simply come quickly… suffering, when it didn't, and as the dread and suspense dragged.

If it were only he that suffered from his own cowardice, that would be one thing. But if his former friends were worried about him… Duck knew Oliver was right. Duck might be tongue-tied but he hadn't gone stone blind. He saw the expressions on the others, saw them mutter to each other with furtive once-overs Duck's way when they thought he didn't notice.

He should put an end to it. He should.

If they knew… well, they'd no longer trouble themselves over him.

They would despise him.

But he'd come here prepared for that.

Hadn't he?

"Donald's made a whole grand excuse to visit the Works to ask them about you," Oliver continued, grumbling. "Meant he made two trips when he could have made it one, and *I* had to cover for him at the

harbour."

"Tragic."

"Bugger off." Oliver sounded glum. "I guess it's no big deal to *you – you* have plenty of experience – I don't shunt goods often, and the trucks always have a bit of a field day with me, when I do. Anyway it's not like Donald got any real answers out of it. He and Douglas still fuss about what's to be done with you. I know Thomas and Toby talk about it too – they look so bleedin' *sad* over you. *Gordon* actually *asked Douglas* what was going on with you last night!" Oliver harrumphed. "You have the eyes of the whole bleedin' railway on you — and you don't even *care*."

His brow furrowed, his frown directed at his own coupling link… Oliver's expression was quite legible.

“Hold on,” said Duck, blankly. “Are you — *jealous* of me?”

He asked this of the popular, confident, heroic 1400 in utter bemusement.

“Oy! Don’t flatter yourself!” Oliver rolled his eyes… but his mouth kept moving. First with a sigh. “Why would I be jealous of you? Donald *brought* me to Sodor. He helped *rescue* me when I might have been stuck just a few miles away from safety. I mighta been at your scrapyard, long ago, if he hadn't thought I was — hadn't thought I was *resourceful*. And *sagacious*. And I am! Gordon says so, you know." The autotank pulled a face. "Used to say so."

"Before I came back." Duck's voice was still a blank.

"Before you came back, yeah. Dunno why Henry thought *you* were worth trading his own life for. He never went out of his way for me. I s'pose you're 'resourceful', yourself" (Oliver's voice was very hard — he almost spat the word. Duck didn't flinch… visibly.) " — but I shouldn't have thought your way of doing things would win many friends! Yet here you are, and somehow everyone acts like you're the patron waterfowl of the rails. I knew your type back on the G.W.," Oliver sulked. "Everyone seemed to respect your kind for the way you could recite all the regulations verse and chapter but I always suspected at bottom prissy, punctilious pilots like you had no heart."

There was a *clunk, clunk-clunk* in Duck's firebox.

Overwhelming and painful and inexorable. Like he was in the vicegrip of a hungry excavator.

Oliver's resentment was ugly, but it wasn't unfounded, either. Duck had to stop being a coward. He *had* to. It would only become the harder to tell, the longer it was left.

Duck swallowed cinder. "Oliver," he said… tone low and dead. He did not look at the other engine.

It was all far too little to put brakes to Oliver's complaints. "The way Donald and Douglas always talked about you — I thought you'd at least be a *little* fun."

"*Oliver*." This finally arrested the flow of the autotank's words. Duck still did not look at him. "Then tell the Twins… tell the Twins I only survived as long as I did because they chose me as shunter. Twice." He had not intended to say more but now it was his flow of words that was screwed open. "In two separate scrapyards. I shunted hundreds of living engines to their deaths, and I shunted thousands of trucks with… what remained. Go on and tell them that, it should solve your

problem."

This bravado was wasted on Oliver… who, when Duck dared survey sidelong, was —

Rolling his eyes.

"Duh."

Duck blinked stupidly at the autotank — several times. He could not have told you what Oliver's expression was, because each blink of his eyes seemed to fracture his vision more than the last. He wound up choking on ash.

"Hack it out," said Oliver, "better out than in. You thought we didn't know?

"N-No."

"Have a second think, mate. You know, that's actually hysterical. You thought you were *so* smooth and sneaky? Yeah, no, we all know the work you did."

The autotank's tone was a curious mixture of cross disgust and bored indifference. Duck just gazed at him dumbly. “*Thomas* doesn’t know,” he choked at last. “He thinks I was just sitting on the scrap line.”

“Well… that’s Thomas, innit?” Oliver rolled his eyes, and Duck felt a peculiar thing bubble on the surface of the water in his boiler.

It might have been amusement.

He cleared his tubes. “Thomas has been very decent to me since my return,” he said, rather stiffly.

“Bully for him,” said Oliver. “I guess those big double-headers left you too spent to freeze him out like you did all your other friends here. But the rest of us worked it out, all right. We’re so close to the millennium that we could spit on it, we *know* a steam engine hasn’t been sitting around the mainland and kept in order all this time without a job and if you came from the scrapyard then we pretty well know what job you had.”

They knew.

Duck's entire world seemed to white out. Light and color broke into the blind whiteness only in painful flashing fragments.

He didn't have to tell them.

He was never going to have to explain.

The Twins hadn't responded with dismay and horror and anger.

Even though…

They knew.

“Gordon?” Duck managed to gasp.

“Dunno,” the autotank admitted. “I like him, but I’m not about to have my face scalded off by being the one to clue him in if he h’ant figured it out. Fat Controller wants peace between you two, doesn’t he? *I’m* not angling to be the next one sent away.”

“Donald knows?” Duck repeated. This time his voice cracked. “For sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the twins talking to each other about it, there’s no mistake. Why are you so gobsmacked? Henry and Edward saw you at it, didn’t they? And they still sent you back here. What, did you think they did it to punish you somehow? I mean, Brunel above knows you don’t seem to enjoy it here.”

“No,” gasped Duck, vague. “No, they didn’t hate me. But that was…” He hadn’t been in any condition to try to grasp what on earth Henry had been thinking; all his behaviour in that place had been so baffling and anyway Duck had never been in the habit of giving Henry’s opinion any weight. Edward’s he had respected a great deal but if the old engine had one fault in Duck’s eyes it was certainly that he erred a little too often on the side of leniency. Of course he had been understanding but Duck had not taken that to mean anyone else would.

But here he was. Skulking in a groove of his own making by the scaliest water on the railway. Wearing blue. Stuck being patronised by a babbling stranger in his own rightful livery.

It was like sitting on a turntable that was suddenly off-kilter.

What was he *doing*.

Meanwhile Oliver was just as pleased to have let Duck's half-formed thought trail off into silence. He seemed to still have quite a lot to get off his steam chest. "No one hates you. I mean, Gordon does — but even he seems like he… well, it's not every engine he condescends to notice. No one else hates you. And on the railway where everyone hates everyone, too. It's quite annoying, to tell you the truth."

"Uh — no one hates *you*." Duck did not say it as reassurance. As usual, he simply could not let such blatantly inaccurate implication stand. To do so was practically a lie… and he was still (somehow) Great Western enough to want nothing to do with that. "No one at all."

Oliver chuckled hollowly. "Oh, definitely not, eh? It's only that most of 'em think I'm a nuisance, and I'm just *dead* to the ones who don't. It's been nearly three months now, and Gordon just looks right through me like I'm not there. I'm kinda tempted to point out to him some day that it's exactly what 'the replica' does when she sees me. That'll get his attention, all right! But," he added, with a mournful note, "it might blow it up beyond all repair."

There was a moment's silence. If Duck hadn't been able to find the words nor the motives to say them before, the situation was even more desperate now. His steam still kept coming up short, with every breath.

And Oliver was brooding.

"'Course, I guess that's what engines do 'round here — blow it all up. To think I ever worried that me hitching a ride here with Donald would cause any trouble for him! You all cause more confusion and delay than that, and you did it long before I arrived, from the sound of it. You and Gordon and everyone. I don't know why everyone acts like

I'm foolish, I'm literally just going around and doing my bit. I could swear you lot are *all* half-cracked — they, they *admire* you!" he burst out, having at last hit his stride. "They really do! *A scrapyard shunter*. This Sodor lot never *saw* modernisation, I reckon they just don't *understand* what you've — but they ought to. They ought to understand! You turn on your fellow engines, it's so obvious, now more than ever — you have a *pattern*. But they've decided what you did *here* was heroism and it's like they don't *understand* what you did on the mainland. Henry traded *places* with you — I s'pose he's beyond caring what he does to survive, himself. But everyone here — Sir Topham Hatt lost his *job* for you… and no one else seems to think that was insanity."

"I do?" muttered Duck… almost soundlessly. "I do."

Oliver appeared not to hear him. This was perhaps as well, for there was a very telling, very painful wobble in Duck's voice. A wobble he could not steady, even when his voice trailed off. He began to rock on his rails, but Oliver was lost in his own troubles. In a further stroke of luck, a train puffed and chuffed through the station. Emily and her grumbling goods rattled the rails and offered convenient cover for Duck's own shake. Then, too, the noise and fuss forced a lull in this most unlooked-for and disorienting conversation. She did not whistle to them. Her eyes were locked straight ahead and it was possible she did not even see Duck, behind Oliver and the water tower. But both Great Western engines watched the progress of the train with vague, distracted, half-seeing eyes.

"They all trust whatever you do is right," Oliver grumbled, but more slowly, gaze still fixed aside. "Everyone except Gordon. But the others aren't all fools, either… even after what you've done the Twins and Thomas and Toby think well of you. *Toad* does, too. Toad! You — " The heat and fight in his words broke all at once. It was with a sort of grudging but quiet defeat that he continued musing. "You must be a really good engine." Sounding vaguely bitter. "Like I don't know what all you've done for them to trust you — maybe it's just that you did stick by Edward, in your own way. I think Gordon's right that you hurt more than you helped but you must have been sincere, anyroad, since you paid the price for it. And everyone says *I'm* too attached to

Gordon's coupling link, heh! But when he was stuck in the shed I didn't do what you did. Never even crossed my mind. Maybe I never was very Great Western, after all. Maybe…" His eyes were still fixed in the distance, where the tail of Emily's passing train had not yet disappeared round the bend. He finished his thought very quietly. "... maybe I'm just a shit friend."

The autotank appeared to virtually hold his breath. After a long moment, he at last released it with a sigh.

Only then did he finally look aside to the pannier tank.

"Cripes!" Oliver jumped with a clang, his wheels all but leaving the rails. Duck could barely see him through the heavy blur, but he *sounded* horrified. "*Cinders and ashes.* Are y-y-you — oi, it's all right, mate? Wh-What's wrong with — " He seemed to have just enough sense to snap off the question as useless. "Do — d'you want me to go fetch someone?"

"No," choked Duck, eyes fixed blindly on nothing. "No. Just — just *go away*."

"Y-Yeah, yeah, okay." Oliver's voice was hasty, desperate reassurance. "Of course. We'll be right off. Look, I'm sorry, okay? I really didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted *answers*, you know? Don't mind me. I'm — I'm not worth sniffling over, you know? I'm an idiot. Ask anyone."

Duck *was* blinking against hot tears. And yet he was as afraid that he was going to laugh as cry.

Perhaps any other hour Duck would have been stung to be so babied. Cross at the stupidity of this stranger presuming that level of

importance to him.

And, in the hours after, he would feel the tired pleasure of relief. Donald knew. Douglas knew. He was a fool, torturing himself, stuck self-consciously in a blue livery that he could not even remember the logic of requesting. But that was the worst of it. He was never to be rejected. He had no real reason to hide. The rails beneath him were safe. All was well.

But in that hour, he only wanted to be alone before he broke down completely.

Oliver's crew — kind men, and quick on the draw — had his steam open directly. So Duck had his wish.

*

(And it may be said, too, that Oliver soon found himself not sorry of a little solitude, either.

He'd given himself a lot to think about.)

*

“Thank you,” the green engine said quietly.

“That’s all right. I couldn’t just leave you there.”

“Other engines would,” Henry said solemnly. “You’ve been really decent. Such kindness is in pretty short supply around here.[”]

- *It's A Splendid Life, chapter 5*

Second Steam

The big engine had spent a few weeks now, wondering if he were really seeing it.

At first, of course, he had only noticed the massive change in his friend that was clearly caused by the application of the rust preventative. From that very afternoon there had been an immediate blankness around Edward, an air of such palpable relief, and Henry — who had watched his friend suffer for years on end — had felt it too. That had seemed plenty enough, at first, to explain any change in the cast of Edward's eye. (***Bastard***, Henry had thought that very night, as his eyes had followed the Mangy Controller's faraway progress towards the chain-link gate to his own small lorry. *You'll take the torch to me in the end — and I'll still be grateful for what you did today*.)

It was here and there in the days following that Henry, somewhat piqued, wondered if there were something more that Edward wasn't telling him. A bizarre circumstance indeed, for what, at this point, could possibly have occurred for Edward to keep secret? If it were anything at all — if Henry were not simply imagining things — then certainly it could be nothing that weighed on the smaller engine very heavily. For those little flashes that crossed Edward's face here and there, the brief occasional cast of Edward's eye — they were odd because they were *familiar*. As if in those moments Henry was looking at more than a mere cessation of pain.

In those moments Henry was transposed back in time. As if he had caught out his friend meditating the year's Hallowe'en story.

Perhaps it made sense, thought Henry — with that tone that humans generally accompany with a shrug. Now they were living in the setting of many of those old stories. If that fact still somehow gave Edward some sort of odd twisted pleasure, then, well, it was better than the alternative. Henry let it go.

There was enough to be getting on with. The scrapyard would soon be open for visitors on Sundays. The Mangy Controller and his assorted relatives and hangers-on rolled their eyes about the thing, and for a time Henry had taken at face value their grumbling explanation that "lookie-loos" used to make such a nuisance of themselves trespassing during proper workdays and even after dark that "open hours" were a concession to curiosity on their own terms… nothing profitable in it, only a bothersome quasi-public duty. To Henry it felt quite a bother indeed. He wouldn't have submitted so quietly to the ridiculous saddletank fitting, if he'd thought anyone would *see!*

Henry felt hard-done-by. For that had been the unspoken part of the deal that he had struck with the Mangy Controller, with Death. He would accept his lot, run toward it even, if it meant he were sequestered from the worst parts of Life.

And now the man allowed outsiders — the real world — *uncertainty* — into his grim domain?

This left Henry vaguely cross. Like he'd been cheated.

At first he didn't entirely understand who these "visitors" were — or what numbers they came in. Few, he hoped. He set about making inquiries, day by day, so as to find out better what to expect. When in steam, he had the liberty all the sidings of this yard, so he needn't rely

on the Odds n' Bods — whom he was beginning to think would not tell him the whole story. They spoke of open Sundays much like the Mangy Controller. As though this were a lot of pother for nothing.

Other vehicles gave this the lie. Busted autos and withdrawn railway coaches, especially. They were in low demand, and they knew it. But their bravado fell away and their eyes gleamed with ever-more-desperate and ever-more-teary hope, the closer the Sunday after Easter came. "Things have left this yard alive before!" an old rear-ended Sunbeam insisted.

Her desperation made Henry uncomfortable and sombre. It was some while before he believed her. But then he discovered that there were "veterans," no few of them Odds n' Bods, who had seen several seasons here, and vouched for this fact… vouched stone-faced, vouched without admitting to any speck of hope. It's a pain in the bumper, they insisted. A rigged game. Most of the gawkers are poor as Job. Even if a machine can catch someone's fancy, the Mangy Controller squeezes every last penny from a potential buyer. "Don't matter to *him* what a vehicle's fate is," Granny the crane screeched down to Henry. "The old devil will turn a profit either way! If you're ever here half as long as I've been — *you'll see*. Many a poor little sod built castles in the air, only to be pulled upstream to the smelters as a pile of pieces."

But if she meant to inflame or depress the green engine, she got little satisfaction. Henry remained pokerfaced. He knew the dangers, of hoping and praying.

Some of the autos did not. They knew nothing about any of this. It's relatively cheap to repair a car, and, unlike the railed vehicles and indeed the great farming or construction equipment, many a car arrived treating the scrapyard as an adventure, wholly in denial. They were used to be being used daily, and often believed themselves to be essential. Even if they were well smashed, they often regarded their damage as "a scratch." They had to come here, they said, for "police purposes." They were almost always confident that their "old lady" or their "man" or their "family" would come and redeem them. Insurance agents would come in and out to take pictures, for which the car

enquired for beamed gap-toothed black-eyed smiles as if on the showroom floor. Henry quickly learned to tune them out. They would not hear sense until they were well and ready, and it was ghastly to listen to them until then. Even once they did, and had to deal with the resulting horror, Henry managed as often as possible to be… somewhere else. Which was easy, because he was allowed to drive himself here. Not that anyone had told him so, but he'd tested his limits and found no one seriously would try to stop him. Just don't do it in front of strangers, the Mangy Controller told him. If someone reported me, I'd have to do *so. much. ruddy. paperwork*.

As usual with him, whenever the scrapper did something Henry liked, he usually did something disagreeable right away, which kept things in balance. This time, the Mangy Controller began to clear space in the cars' lot — nice and centre, well within site of the front gate. Now the weather was warm, they chose two cars to work on. Not to scrap — no space need be cleared, for that. To repair.

This inflamed the hopes of all the autos beyond all dousing.

Henry refused to feel sick over this. All vehicles are foolish, when they're young. They had to learn… except for the condemned cars. They would never have to. Henry didn't pretend to understand, himself, the complicated algorithm by which the humans decided some cars merited becoming a "project," and others didn't. It seemed to him that the Mangy Controller was setting a stage, that he was merely using these two lottery-winning cars for some other purpose… but he did not pretend he could understand that, either.

He just got on with things.

Granny the crane assured him that the visitors didn't arrive in any great numbers. Usually came in a quiet trickle. No great fuss made. The scrappers spent most of their "open Sundays" holed up in their office, watching sport, and only emerging if their inmates raised an indignant hue and cry over some thief or unwanted tagger. If there

were a potential buyer, Granny said, the Mangy Controller "stuck his antennas out his hidey-hole" of his own accord, but wouldn't leave the comfort of his office to chase down anyone. "But believe me, teapot. He can *smell* which ones come 'ere wi' money weighin' on 'em. He's always sorter luring 'em into his lair, like. Even if it don't look like he's doin' a thing."

Henry began to believe that, because the week after Easter he found that the Mangy Controller took yet more trouble over preparations. Henry and other working machines were employed… not so much *tidying* the yard as visitor-proofing it. The sludgiest and smelliest and most disagreeable things were all gathered together in great clumped mounds, which kept people out of over half the yard much more effectively than cordons could ever have done. Amid the main lot of cars in front of the garage, surrounding the two "projects," other cars were laid out in rows and columns. A few cars were draped with tarps — but untidily, wheels or enticing bits of chassis peeping from behind. The Odds n' Bods, tucked away in the back corner lot, were removed from all this staging. People would have to wander off the main lot to go and find them.

Henry found himself, in a strange topsy-turvy way, reminded of holiday decoration. He was even instructed in moving around some unbroken rail-stock — instructed very minutely, back under the control of a driver, and the Mangy Controller troubling to hike over and micromanage the placement of various trucks and coaches. It had been very annoying at the time, but in the days afterwards he realised the effect. The stock now almost but not completely hid the assorted class 110 units that Henry and Edward slept beside every night.

He asked Granny, and she happily gossiped to him that the class 110s units were indeed a great "get." They had "interested parties." A heritage railway paid the Mangy Controller a deposit each year, to not take them apart. This might be the year that they scraped together the funds to take the 110s from the yard… or it mightn't. The Mangy Controller profited, either way. He had made a point of collecting other 110 units, to create an even more enticing set, and enthusiasm for the lot seemed to grow a bit, season by season. Slowly but surely. At least one of the 110s were sure to leave, in the end. "They're *local*,

you see," Granny screeched. "Calder Valley stock."

Henry had frowned. "Edward's local…"

He was made to repeat himself three times. The crane was going deaf, but she insisted on hearing, would not let him off.

"Well and sure, the Odds n' Bods are your Mangy Controller's best hopes for a good 'turn-over'. Those old beaters in the car lot don't fetch nothin'!"

Oh.

Henry felt his whole understanding of this place slowly revolve and flip.

"Does this mean Edward has a chance?"

"Ask the old devil." (This had apparently been the Mangy Controller's most common nickname, before Henry's arrival.) "Or just look and see if he's well-hidden."

Edward *was*. He was behind the class 110s units, Henry realised. The already-rent-paying class 110s. It wasn't the diesels that the Mangy Controller had been hiding… positioning as far back from the gate and car lot as possible…

"He doesn't advertise his best wares," Henry agreed slowly. He was coming to understand… but it was contrary to everything he knew

about business. "Don't see why."

"It's part of the charm, iz'nit? People don't come here for the usual fast-talking pitch. If they do go and rescue a vehicle, it's because they think it was all their own idea. That they found something everyone else overlooked. They come here to stumble upon their treasure. To fall in love. Then to be the knight in shiny armour who fights the big, bad, miserly scrap-man. So he goes and he lets 'em do it. That's Salesmanship."

Briefly, he felt very cold.

He'd not spent weeks resigning himself to the idea of Edward leaving him behind in this dull limbo for *life* rather than death… and yet Henry could hardly wish for it to not happen.

Then again, this just sounded like the business with the Fat Controller all over again. Henry wasn't a particularly clever engine, but he knew from bitter experience that an interest in doing something with an engine, and the funds to enable it, were two very different things. The Calder Valley diesel stock themselves were a good reminder of that.

Anyway, he had one more summer with his friend. That was unlooked-for good fortune, and, surely, fresh material to talk over as the hot weeks wore on could not be entirely unwelcome.

And that was where matters stood, until that Saturday.

After a few desultory jobs, he parked himself in his usual spot in the sequestered southern corner of the yard. Henry and the other Odds n' Bods exchanged quite a few words before, in one of the many lapsed silences (scrapyard conversations generally moved at a glacial pace), Edward finally looked at him sidelong.

"Will you be in steam tomorrow?"

"Don't expect so," said Henry. "Isn't really a work day. Why?"

"You ought'er ask," said the Van on Cinderblocks. "Make 'im build your fire, when he comes in."

"People love steam," said the Calder Valley motor unit. His tone was deeply neutral. He might have meant the observation to support the Van's proposal; he might have meant it to do the opposite. "You would have alllll eyes on you."

"God, no," said Henry, with a sort of horror. "I mean. Look at me." The other machines in this place could snigger all they like but they were the living dead, and he didn't care a fig what the scrappers and his associates thought. But people from the real world would come and go the following day, and that was quite a different proposition. Henry had no less pride in his appearance than any steam engine — to put it mildly.

"Mmm," agreed a Single Car Unit. "The saddle does look daft. If you won't be steamed, you might have 'em take it off."

"It doesn't matter," said Henry — sounding heated, because in his heart it did. For the first time he understood why everyone in this back lot bad-mouthed the idea of salvation, even when they ought know better. Here he was now, doing it himself. "We're all a lot of circus freaks is what we are. Sounds like only the autos have any chance of being purchased, and not even so many of them."

"We-ell," agreed Cinderblocks. "There's something in that…"

"Our lot back here attract teenagers and shutterbugs," said a battered, lopsided bus (she was eternally jammed in crouching position). "Very few who come looking to buy."

Edward looked sidelong at him again.

"Have them leave you in that leafy corner behind the office tonight, Henry."

There was a moment's collective puzzlement. Edward only waited — and although he did not fully smile, still there was something in his calm, light, steady gaze that took Henry back in time several decades. When he had been young and anxious, and Edward had been well and whole. Even in Henry's worst days — and there had been a lot of them — Edward had been able to smile at him, and in a way that Henry didn't resent. As if Edward's optimism were no insult, but rather something tangible where Henry could, and was welcome to, find shelter.

"Overnight?" Henry sounded one part cross, and four parts blank. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

The wheel-less van snorted. "Doesn't want the competition for tomorrow, duz'ee?"

This was so absurd a suggestion, a statement that was so utterly contrary to everything about Edward's character, that Henry was shaken out of his stupor. He supposed that it was much more likely that Edward simply didn't want Henry to witness his reaction to guests. 'Teenagers and shutterbugs.' A small gaggle of railway-related youngsters had trespassed Tidmouth sheds some time back. Henry hadn't been there but from what he had heard (and from the

shellshocked skittishness with which all the railway workers' children had behaved afterwards, whenever they were near the sheds) Edward had chased them away with blistering rage. Henry had been able to believe it, though with a great sadness, because after his accident Edward had sometimes revealed a vicious side that they all wished they'd never had to see.

But it didn't make sense, for that ashamed, bitter, pained engine seemed so utterly transformed, was so far away from the gentle, affectionate humour with which Edward was even then watching Henry's confusion. "Why?" Henry demanded, ignoring the van and all the others completely. "What's going on?" When Edward only gazed calmly at him, Henry frowned. "You're not… you're not going to somehow try to gas *me* up, are you?"

This made the other vehicles twitch — to squint at him, and then to transfer that collective squint at Edward.

Who just smiled vaguely. Only when several long minutes had passed did Edward finally address the question. "Perhaps I simply think you need a change of scenery."

Henry frowned again. "I sit in that siding for hours, each week."

"Never at night," said Edward positively.

"I'm telling ya," the 110 motor said to Henry. "He knows he's more likely to attract interest if he's not next to you."

"Chuff off." Henry said this very mildly, not really paying any mind, focussed as he was on his friend. "You *ought* to be trying to attract attention, though. For yourself. Tell them *your* story, tomorrow."

Edward smiled at him. " 'Make me.'"

Oh, this was the game, was it? It was a stupid one, though. Henry had offered Edward something realistic, when he'd stayed by his side here — not *much* comfort, but something real and tangible. He'd not expected Edward to 'make it up' to him, that hadn't been the point of the gesture. Yet Henry couldn't help but feel let down when Edward went and grandly offered him this soap bubble in return. Henry knew his friend meant well but the idea was delusional and it made him feel lonely in a way nothing else could have. "Wish I could make you," he said glumly. "There's no point in you trying to get me out… never happen. I came in here of my own free will and I did it with eyes open. I'd be glad to see you get out, though. Someone *ought* to preserve you." Edward raised an eyebrow at him, wordless, eloquent. With a swift crooked grin he somehow indicated all the vast hopeless inadequacy of his own condition. It was a fair point, of course, and Henry was hardly one to avoid stark reality. But he had to snort when Edward's eyes instead roved pointedly along Henry's long, undamaged boiler. "We both know I've never worked well, and I have no pedigree. But you're local, you're part of the history here, and… and you'd deserve it. You're special, Edward."

It took a little longer than Henry might have expected for Edward to dismiss this — for a moment or two the typically modest, unassuming little engine stared deeply at something beyond their own reality. But then he emitted a little huff of air… his damaged, dry, rusty version of a chuckle. "Only our Fat Controllers ever thought I was worth a second glance — and they were short on options. There were thousands of engines like me, common and obscure. But you, Henry. You're one-of-a-kind."

"Erm. In the sense that I was, in fact, a scam."

"That's a unique story."

Henry had to laugh because what on earth could one do? "Unique. That's a word for it. My builders had to *lie* to hide their methods and motives for making me."

"Yes," said Edward gravely. "People hate old mysteries. That sort of thing can never be made interesting to them at all."

This was absurd — and Henry's pique was prickled more still when the other scrap vehicles most all began to look at Edward with new consideration, a dry snort or two emerging from the lot.

"All right, *maybe* that's intriguing," said Henry, "but that takes us to 1923. And what is there to say after that? My career wasn't exactly what you'd call illustrious. I was a disappointment to everyone, including myself. Maybe not to you," he added, unable to help rolling his eyes, "but… you're you."

"Good thing it's me who will be telling the story, then."

Henry found it more frustrating than he probably ought to see the other vehicles — although mostly just watching the discussion for the pure entertainment value — visibly coming to side more with Edward. He'd never been more popular than Edward in his life before they'd come here and it rankled more than he wanted to admit to see himself lose that rare advantage. "Do be serious. I never did… anything interesting. Not in my whole life!"

"Ehhh," said old Cinderblocks.

"Mmm," agreed Yellow Lorry.

"You argued with your owners and the scrap-man to *stay* here!" cackled the Single Car Unit. "Do you think any other vehicle in the country ever did anything as daft as that? That was a sight!"

"She's right," said the Crouching Bus.

" 'Here's the story about how my friend with the stupidly-small saddletank talked himself into this scrapyard on purpose'," Henry recited. " 'Therefore, someone ought go to great expense to get him out of it'?"

"Mmmm," conceded Edward. "Tough sell."

"So we agree, then."

"Oh, no," said Edward, all sweetness. "I am not agreeing that it's impossible. Only that you're right, I should hardly lead with that one."

Henry rolled his eyes *audibly*.

"Well, what does that leave you with? Come off it, you know I led a boring life. There's no story about it."

And Henry thought that was the last word, for everyone was silent for quite some time. Long enough to slightly depress him. In his heart he would have relished being proven wrong. He would have loved if Edward in all his mysterious wisdom had somehow hit back with some glorious bit of redeeming truth about himself that Henry (in all his own plodding confusion!) had missed. Henry was under no illusions that there was anything about himself that could ever

recommend him to preservationists, of course. But he should have liked no less than any of us to be told nice things about himself before he died, for some angelic reassurance that he had been noble and heroic all along.

You can imagine Henry's feelings, then, when after some time he realised that Edward — poor long-unsteamed Edward, who really couldn't do it anymore — was approximating a *hum*.

It was so dry and tuneless that Henry did not recognise the melody. But, once he realised Edward was humming, he knew *exactly* what it must be and he whistled loud indignation.

Far from quaking or apologising, Edward left off his broken notes of '*Once an engine attached to a train*' only to rock the rails with silent laughter.

Silent, but real laughter. There was a twinkle in his eye that hadn't been there for years and years.

"Oh come off it!" fussed Henry. "You're going to pitch me using *the most*, the most, the-the-the most — "

"Dramatic?"

" — *ignominious* day of my career?!"

There were some yelps of not-so-silent laughter now, from the rest of the group.

"Why are you the storyteller," Cinderblocks asked Edward, with a casually contemptuous good humour, "if this is the one usin' ten-quid words like that?"

The SCU peered up over her nose at the rusted old relic. "The 'quid' is a newer currency," she explained, with mock kindliness. "It replaced the 'denarius', or whatever the Romans used."

"Thank you," said Edward. "And Henry's vocabulary has always been commendable. It's lucky I was reminded in time."

" 'In time'." Henry scoffed. "You're obviously mad…"

His scoff broke off and trailed off into an eerie quiet. His own words had shaken loose a recent memory, and it was a moment before he huffed against the weird tricks his own intuition must be playing on him.

"You're mad," he repeated, more firmly. "No one is going to be interested in a wonky counterfeit whose only memorable exploits all involve *not* doing what his humans tell him to do."

"I'm glad your expectations are so realistic," said Edward. "The odds are certainly quite long."

Henry stared blankly at him. At his oldest friend, torn and diminished. Dirty and rusty. And yet — once again — coated in that old calm, steady faith that had once been so unshakable. "Come off it… look at the pair of us," he said. "We can cling to 'loyalty'. 'Dignity' is behind us. We're well past the 'hope' portion of our lives."

"Mmmm." Edward gave him one last glance — that glance, crinkled with a smile, that had said, all Henry's life, that he had at least one friend on his side. That look he'd had when they had gossiped and conspired, had confessed to and consoled each other.

Then the old engine closed his eyes, and the multitude of lines on his faced sagged with real weariness. It seemed he was preparing to nap, to rest up for his self-appointed mission the next day. An engine who was never going to stop finding one last job to do, until he was well and truly dead.

"Well…" he murmured, "we'll not know, till we try."

*

"Gee, it looks small." Thomas gazed at for a second, trying to fit everyone in. "I don't actually understand now, how it housed six of us. And some of us were Gordon-sized..." There was about one second of lapsed silence, and he couldn't take it. "D'you know Eight-Seven-Five-One-Oh-Two-Four-Four-Four-Seven-Eight or whoever? I s'pose he was before your time," Thomas went on, having known full well all along that it was so, "but he was stuck over there for a fair bit. Fat Controller couldn't decide if we needed him or if he lost us too many clients... oh, that wasn't his real number," he added, a little horrified as he saw Neville's raised eyebrows and for the first time really, truly understood how their railway must appear to an outsider, "that's only how I used to joke, it was just a laugh. But he went by a number because he wanted *to. He thought it was beneath him to accept a name. It's not like we* took *it from him."*

- *Small World, chapter 9*

Apparition

The old boiler munched methodically on a great knot that had once been three or four bricks. This offering was made to it every week, during its rub down and maintenance. Somewhat like a propitiation to a great seething demigod — but it was only the neighbourliness of Old Matty, the custodian, who would never dreamed of visiting anyone bedbound with empty hands. Its great glassy eyes were glued to the colourful flickering of the rounded screen. The telly was new-ish — new enough to be fed by cable, instead of relying on antennae — but it was already so much a part of the humid, hissing, narrow boiler room that it might have been there for as long as the water-heater who watched it, sixteen hours a day, day in and day out.

The telly was its lifeline, its companion. More than a companion — a whole society. And more than society — an education. The telly had taught the boiler many a wondrous thing. Had unfolded many an old, inscrutable human mystery… slowly, by patient degrees.

It was more important by far than the faint sounds of talk or of clattering little wheeled trays from the hallway behind the boiler. It was more important than whatever happened in the laundry and kitchen whose water it heated — the boiler had been told (belatedly, long after the change, in passing) that the building housing it, which had once been a great hospital, had been converted into a hotel. Nevermind that the boiler couldn't fathom why Vicarstown would need a hotel. It barely remembered what Vicarstown was, nor where it was. None of that mattered. Where the boiler really existed was in the world of the Screen.

The Screen was certainly more important than the abrupt draught entering the room. An automatic, unfelt thought of *close the damn door, already* flicked rapidly through the boiler's mind, occupying no

more time than the infinitesimal pause between one actor's line and another's.

The stamping footfalls that followed were not its caretaker — the boiler knew Old Matty's shuffling gait well; it was the only sound in the world it liked nearly as well as the opening notes of *Coronation Street* — and the shoes across the floor scuffled and scriffed rather than squeaked and squelched.

Their owner stopped at points in its trek alongside the boiler to peer and inspect. The boiler, entrapped as it was by much exterior piping, appeared at first to be raised upon a platform, although there was something funny about that elevation, difficult to parse even when bathed in the dim light. The man holding the thin torch, however, nodded grimly to himself at what he saw.

Then he resumed his walk forward, causing the water-heater to gnash its teeth one last time, cross. It had instinctively munched its great clay wad with violent, staccato vehemence since detecting the intruder… who apparently was too stupid to frighten.

The boiler's eyes flicked to the visitor once the man was in its field of sight, briefly, before returning to the telly.

The man said hello, and it only hissed *Shhhhhhhh*.

This left the man frowning and stymied — for a moment. Then he marched on over to the television. His finger hovered for an instant over the power button but, as that was indeed the only light source in the narrow chamber, he elected for *mute*, and then stood in front of the screen with fists on his hips.

"Rude!" said the boiler.

"I should have thought you'd want to make the most of a visitor."

"Chuff a visitor. Sahira is about to tell David it's not his baby. It's my favourite part." It tried to peer around the man, but his girth blocked its view of the tiny moving figures on the screen all too effectively and the boiler scowled. "Who the devil are you? Check what you need to check and be off!"

"I am here to see you."

"I'm nothing. Stand aside, would you."

"Nothing? Nonsense." The man spoke his next words with the deliberation of a spell-caster. "You're 87546."

The power of the spell proved true. The boiler looked at the interloper for the first time, really looked.

Great things like it seldom distinguish the small details of human-scale. The boiler in particular had always, especially in the days when it had been a railway engine, held people too much in contempt to make the slightest effort to tell one from the other, nor imagined how much trouble it caused for itself by such indifference.

But the boiler had been under the television's tutelage for many years now. It had learned heaps and mounds about humans. And the more it looked at this human before it, the more details it picked out and examined, the less the figure resembled an inconsequential bit character.

Its glassy eyes grew somewhat glassier, blinking bafflement. "What year is it?"

"Unimportant," said the Fat Apparition. "The war's long over, at any rate."

"D'you think I don't know that? *I watch the news*." But the clouds of confusion on the boiler's face could not clear so rapidly. "You can't be the old man. You're dead, aren't ya? You ought to be a good six feet deeper than I."

"I'm the new old man. Thank you for your condolences."

The boiler snorted, less glassy now, but not one bit abashed. "Thank *you* for the time of day. It's thirty years at least I've been left here!"

"I always believed that my father scrapped you," said the new Topham Hatt. 87546 had known him as a boy. He now looked uncannily like the Fat Director, as he'd been when he'd had the most troublesome engine on his fleet installed here, after some years of idleness. Humans were spooky, that way. Creepy little shapeshifters. (Except dear old Matty. Surely *he'd* never been anything other than gnarly-knuckled and hairy-eared. It wasn't possible… the boiler could not have tolerated the thought.) "As I was meant to. It was the story he put out." The boiler snorted, and Hatt continued more sharply: "He did so to protect you… he was under great pressure to donate you to the War Department's scrap drive. You caused rather a lot of trouble, when you were on our rails, did you not?"

His eyes searched the boiler's. If he were looking for regret, however, he'd be looking for it some time. He made the smart play, and pressed on.

"Still, I ought to have suspected. My father was in talks to buy this property, you know, and I suppose he meant to secure you. He suffered a sudden decline before he could complete the business and passed rather unexpectedly. I never suspected you were alive, not until I was recently sent to Vicarstown. Only then did I hear some interesting rumours of what had really happened in '41."

If not dutiful remorse, there was *something* in the boiler's expression. Its eyes gleamed, and for the first time steam pressed from its nose. It sounded defiant enough… but that was not the emotion that threatened to twist its face, either.

"This programme is dreadful dull." The boiler blew a raspberry (the chewy clay wad, apparently, not substituting quite so adequately for gum as to create a bubble from it), which the man flinched at — briefly. "Is it over now?"

"*Over?*" boomed Topham Hatt's son and heir.

"Never cared for this history rubbish. I want to switch back to Channel 4."

"You have so little interest, then, in returning?"

"Returning?" The boiler rolled its eyes.

"Our main line could make use of new motive-power, just now. It is strikingly fortunate."

"I already have a job!"

"For the moment. Until this hotel is prepared to upgrade."

The boiler blinked. Time had been suspended for it for so long. Oh, the telly told it the date every morning and night, on the news. Yet at the same time its glow had bathed the boiler in eternity. This encounter was a very cold blast of air. "Is that a threat?"

"It is an observation. You are a singular sort of water-heating system. Inefficient, frankly."

"What rubbish. 'Inefficient and singular,' on this island? — Only means my job security is absolute. You don't seem to have half the sense your old man did, you know. And he'd never been caught dead in *that* costume…" The very mention of his uniform set the man off into what seemed to be a habitual little tick of using his forefinger to tug futilely at an oppressive collar. Though almost flint-faced, one could just about detect the shadow of a scowl beneath the brim of his smart railway cap. 87546 *did* detect it, and biffed that sore spot mercilessly. "All those winds of nepotism at your back, and the highest you could climb was *stationmaster?*"

87546 had a notorious cackle. It had terrorised drivers, managers, scores of trucks, every coach on this very island, and no few of his fellow engines.

But its visitor, backlit by the flickering Screen, wasn't shaken.

"Well…" The busy light of the television bounced off the narrow walls, putting the contours of his face into deep shadow. But when he looked up at the boiler, raised above the shadows on its running board and ten wheels, his eyes had a catlike gleam. "Perhaps you and I can help each other see the sun again."

*

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